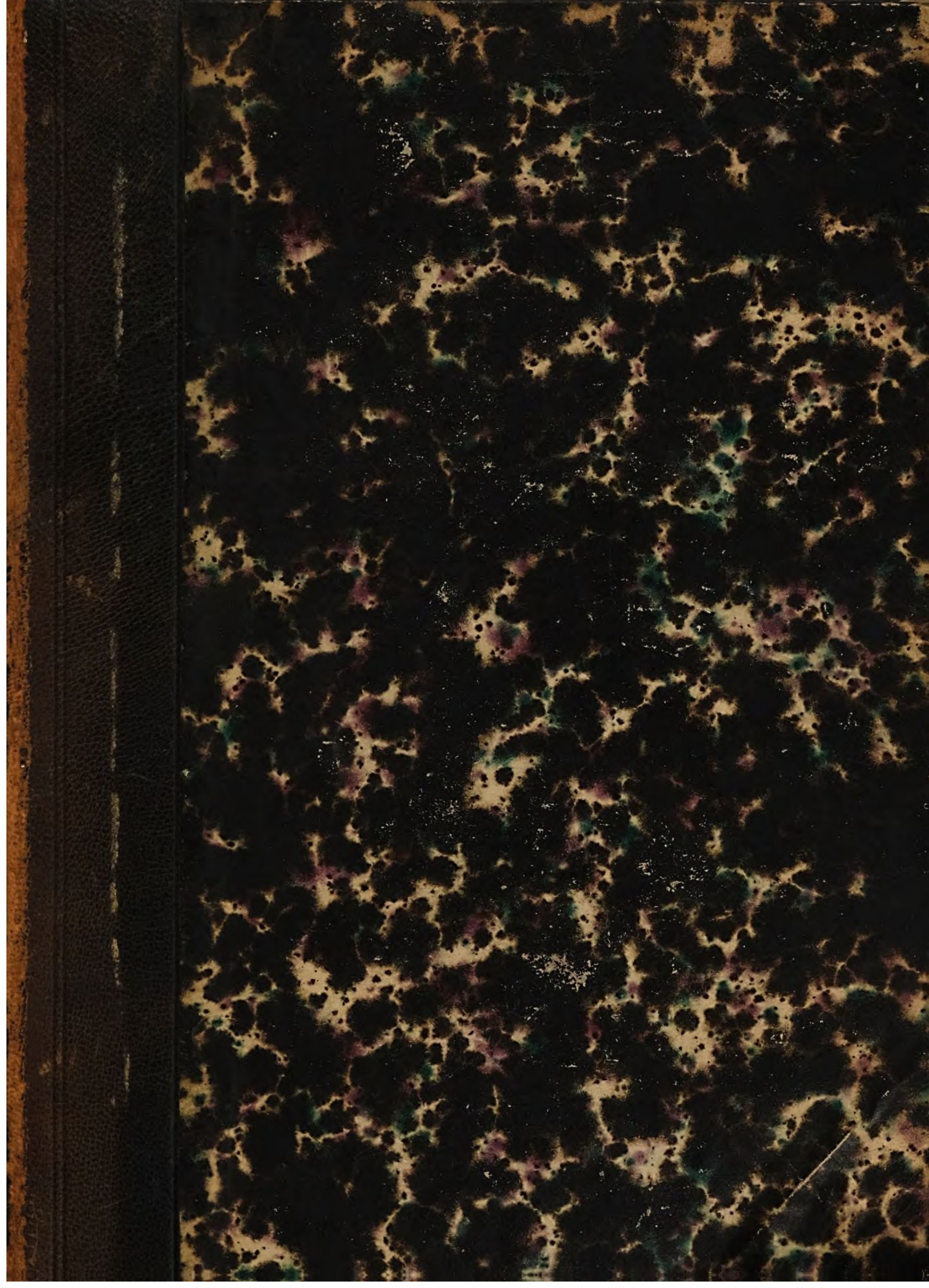




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NEAR NEIGHBOURS.

BY

FRANCES MARY PEARD,

AUTHOR OF

“THE ROSE-GARDEN,” “CONTRADICTIONS,” ETC.

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1885.

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“Know that my blessing lay in your forsaking.”

ADELAIDE PROCTOR.



NEAR NEIGHBOURS.

CHAPTER I.

“Oh, how this spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day;
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by-and-by a cloud takes all away.”

“GOOD morning.”

“Good morning, Johanna. Have you slept well, in spite of the cold?”

“Admirably.”

“That is right. And now, do you know, I have a serious bit of news for you. Don't look too frightened, though! It is only that you will be obliged to put up with a *tête-à-tête* this morning, for my father was called away early. There was a horrid fire somewhere, and of course it was necessary he should go and say how many buckets of water were to be poured upon it.”

“That comes of being burgomaster. And you must get used to these sacrifices for your country, Cootje.”

“I don't see why.”

“Oh, but you must. A deputy's wife ought to be always ready to put herself into the shade.”

“We shall see!” said Cootje, with a laugh. “Come and stay with us at the Hague, and you will soon find out whether I am in the shade or not.” She suddenly

jumped up from behind her tea-making, and stood by Johanna's chair. "Oh, do you think it is all real?" she exclaimed. "Do you know that in two days I shall be a bride?"*

"Indeed, I do know. I am not likely to be allowed to forget, considering how much I hear of it from morning to night," returned Johanna, cutting for herself a paring of black rye bread, and laying it on a slice of bread and butter. "Let me mention what is a much more serious fact to me at this moment——"

"What?" demanded Cootje, resting her hands lightly on Johanna's shoulders.

"That you have given me no sugar in my tea."

The other laughed, and seizing the sugar bowl, dropped in four pieces.

"There, grumbler!" she said. "You are so unsentimental, or rather you pretend to be!"

"Oh, I am. I keep creature comforts well in the front. Haven't you noticed that when your talk about Bernhard becomes too lengthy, I take refuge in sleep or in chocolates?"

"I haven't mentioned his name to-day," cried Cootje indignantly.

"A quarter to nine," remarked Johanna, looking at her watch. "There are a good many hours still before us, and I must fortify myself."

A mischievous twinkle crept into Cootje's eyes.

"Oh, I'm ready enough to turn the subject," she said, with a light laugh. "Perhaps we might talk about some one else. Perhaps I know more than you suppose."

"Pray what do you know?" asked Johanna quickly. But her face flushed as she put the question, and she did

* In the Netherlands the titles of bride and bridegroom are given (and given only then) for a fortnight before the actual marriage.

not look at Cootje, who, once more ensconced behind her cups, kept a provoking silence.

The room in which the two girls were breakfasting was a warm and comfortable apartment in a Dutch country house. It was winter, but no cold penetrated to this room, which was, however, rather dependent for its heating upon the hot-air apparatus which warmed the house than upon the small stove standing before the chimney-piece. A thick Smyrna carpet covered the floor, gaudy chromo-lithographs hung on the walls, a cabinet filled to repletion with blue china of the most rare and delicate description stood near the door, and a few pieces of old Dresden were stuck about here and there, evidently rather with the intention of getting them out of the way than of producing artistic effects, towards which, indeed, there was nowhere any attempt. The blue china over which Cootje presided was equally fine with that in the cabinet, and standing by her side was the national *theestoof*, a high round stand filled at the top with glowing embers, in the centre of which was placed a brown lacquered tea-kettle. On the breakfast-table a beautiful old open-work silver basket was piled high with delicious bread, rolls, and buns; besides this were the usual two silver biscuit-boxes, one round and the other oval; to say nothing of butter, jam, half a Dutch cheese, and the black rye bread.

The two girls who ate bread and butter with an excellent appetite were unlike each other. Cootje van Oord was tall and handsome, with brown eyes, dark hair, and a slightly aquiline nose. Her figure was remarkably fine, and her dress fitted so exquisitely that you could not forget it as you looked at her, not even when she brought the most charming smile in the world to play upon you. She had a host of admirers, who were

never sure what it was about her which they most admired.

In spite of this uncertainty, she was easier to describe than Johanna, who might have been six or seven years her senior. At first sight there was nothing remarkable about her, nor did the people in the street turn to look at her as they did when Cootje passed them. If she had charms they required time, acquaintanceship, opportunities, to set them working: they consisted, probably, rather in expression than features, and, to tell the truth, varied as much according to the people who looked at her, as with any change on her own part. What they found depended—or so it seemed—upon what they brought; but that has been said of such great things in nature and in art, that it need hardly be considered a deficiency. What was more fatal to her popularity was an occasional dreamy absence of mind—a bad habit, for it almost invariably brings with it an accusation of pride or coldness. When a conversation did not interest, Johanna's thoughts would wander into pleasanter channels, her eyes were too honest not to betray her, and the visitor would pronounce against her a verdict of want of sympathy. She was not nearly so popular as her friend Cootje. And yet—no one who had reached towards the heights of her nature ever called her unsympathetic; she had a power of love and self-devotion which would render her capable of any sacrifice, and indeed, Cootje considered her mission in life to consist in withholding Johanna from doing something preposterously foolish in that line.

If she were trying now to put her friend out of countenance, she did not altogether succeed, for although Johanna flushed she repeated her question serenely—

“What do you know?”

“I know that it will not be for very long that I shall

have the satisfaction of acting as chaperon to my sedate senior, Johanna Steen. I know some one who reads all the dull naval intelligence without missing a word, and who trembles if the wind only blows in the chimney." There was a minute's silence, then Cootje uttered an impatient "Well?"

"Well?"

"Are you going to deny it?"

"Why should I?" asked Johanna after a moment.

"Ah, you can't!" exclaimed Cootje triumphantly. But she suddenly checked the words which were following, turned away her head, and drummed on the table with her slender fingers.

It was Johanna's turn to jump up. She took the girl's head between her hands, turned her face to her own and kissed it. Tears stood in the dark eyes.

"Cootje!" cried Johanna, with a burst of remorse.

"Well, why did you, then?" said Cootje inconsequently.

"Why did I what?"

"Try to keep it from me. When first I knew about Bernhard, didn't I go to you first of all? I was as sure of you as you ought to have been of me."

"That was quite different," Johanna pleaded.

"And how?"

"Nothing has been settled with us. It was no want of trust. I longed for you to know, and yet I could not tell. Dear Cootje, you forgive me!"

"No, I don't quite," said the other, shaking her head. "You must answer a number of questions first. Now, begin. Where is Heer Wrangel?"

"He is on his way home from Java," said Johanna humbly.

"In what ship?"

"In the *Prins Maurits*."

"And what is he?—vice-admiral, captain, lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant, of course. Do not mock me, Cootje."

"Eat your bread and butter, and go on—or, stay."

She jumped up and rang the bell. A man-servant answered it by bringing in two red and gold lacquered bowls, one large, one small, which he placed on a little table by the side of his young mistress, filled them with hot water, laid a folded cloth on the table and retired. She began leisurely to wash and wipe the delicate cups and saucers they had been using, then the tea-spoons.

"Now go on. Are you going to marry him directly he returns?"

"What do you mean by directly?"

"Oh, I dare say the day is fixed."

"Cootje!"

"How should I know? Enlighten me, then, a little further."

"We can't think of marriage till he is promoted. Of course it is that which has kept me silent."

"A fine reason! And I suppose as I am permitted to extract all this information that the said promotion is not very far off?"

"He thinks not. But, indeed——"

"Oh, indeed and indeed!" jeered Cootje. "However, I am so pleased to find that I was in the right, and to prove to you that I knew it all the time, and to discover that you have a few sensible ideas still belonging to you, that I am more forgivingly disposed than I might have been. I only hope that when Lieutenant—or, better still, Captain—Wrangel comes home, he will not allow you to sacrifice yourself for your brother's family."

Johanna, who had been smiling, looked troubled.

"Ah, when you talk of my brother," she said, "I begin to fear that I am very selfish."

Cootje rolled her handkerchief into a ball and flung it at her.

"You will make me break the china in a moment, you are so provoking!" she said. "Are not a father and a mother intended to look after their children? Why do you suppose that it is your duty to interfere with the arrangements of Providence?"

"Frans is so much occupied with his books, and his work as Town Councillor!" murmured Johanna apologetically.

Cootje made a little gesture of disbelief as to the amount of labour required; but controlling herself, said—

"And what of that? Is not your sister-in-law, Clara, sufficient?"

"Yes; dear Clara! If she were not there!"

"If she were not there, it might be different; but as she is there, and is quite capable and charming," exclaimed Cootje, packing her tea-spoons into a velvet-lined case, "I don't see why she shouldn't fill the place in which Heaven has placed her, without your supposing it to be necessary to hover close behind. I know she has a handful in Hilvardine; but, trust me, with girls of that sort mothers do best left alone."

Johanna for an instant showed a little vexation.

"Please don't imagine I interfere," she said quickly.

"Oh, I don't. But I don't think you will ever understand Hilvardine, and you can't do as I do, indulge a good comfortably expressed dislike."

"I have never yielded to Clara's wish that I should live with them," said Johanna, apparently defending herself.

"No. That is the one point on which I give you

credit. Once in the house not even Lieutenant Wrangel would have got you out of it!"

"How wise you are, Cootje!" said the other, laughing again. "Is it already the weight of bridal honours which produces these sententious remarks?"

"Don't call me sententious."

"Then be serious, and tell me if it is strange that my brother's family should occupy my thoughts?"

"Your half-brother," corrected her friend.

"Well, my half-brother. I am alone in the world; Frans and Clara had always been good to me——"

"Do be accurate, and say you have always been good to Frans and Clara."

"—And their children must naturally be my first care."

"Poor Lieutenant Wrangel! No, no, don't be angry, Johanna. Of course, I understand that a husband is nothing in comparison."

"Cootje, you are too bad! He is not my husband, we are not even engaged, and if I thought that seeking my own happiness in this matter would throw more burdens on poor Clara, I should have nothing to say to him."

"Then I think you are horrid, and I believe he will think so, too! See how you are even provoking sweet-tempered me. Poor Clara, indeed! You had better say selfish Clara!"

"I said—*if*."

"Yes; and luckily I think better of Madame Steen's good sense than of your's. Let us say no more. What will you do this morning? Leentje declares that I must not be out of the way, there is so much fitting on hand. Lucky for her that the *trekvaart* is not frozen over, or ropes would not have kept me. But what are you going to do?"

"I shall help Leentje, of course. You know I came here to be useful."

"That's very nice of you," said Cootje, kissing her. "Perhaps now I shall be able to make up my mind about that pearl trimming; but Bernhard discomfited all our arrangements by vowing that he hated pearls. Did you ever hear such an atrocious sentiment?"

If Johanna's thoughts, stirred by this conversation, flew many times that day to those grey waters over which the *Prins Maurits* was sailing homewards, and if sometimes Cootje smiled to see the dreamy haze creep across her eyes, it could not be denied that she worked very effectively. The time for discussion had past, her decisions were prompt and well judged, and Cootje's pretty little upstairs boudoir began to take an orderly appearance. The girls were in high spirits; all the small incidents of the day turned themselves into gaiety; everything was funny, even the discovery of some extremely delicate embroidery, all crushed and spoiled, under Ajax, the huge yellow and white house dog. Perhaps Cootje's advice, perhaps the first breaking of the silence, perhaps the happy possibilities brought before her in her friend's advancing happiness,—something, at any rate, made Johanna radiant. Winter was nearly over, spring would soon be upon them, and a pot of white hyacinths in a Delft *jardinière* gave sweet promise of its arrival. In her heart, too, flowers were breaking into blossom, and hope, the most enchanting of them all, was already beautiful.

CHAPTER II.

“Von dem Dome
Schwer und bang
Tönt die Glocke
Grabgesang.
Ernst begleiten ihre Trauerschläge
Einen Wanderer auf dem letzten Wege.

Ach! die Gattin ist's, die theure,
Ach! es ist die treue Mutter.”

THE wedding had been over for a month, by which time Monsieur and Madame van Weede had settled themselves at the Hague. Johanna, for her part, had gone back to Arnheim, which, without being definitely called her home, had grown to be one at any rate so far as the actual living was concerned. Perhaps one requires a certain ideal to be carried out before we consent to the name, and it might be that Johanna kept that name carefully wrapped up and set aside as belonging to a more satisfying future. At present, nevertheless, she lived there with a widowed aunt. Arnheim is different from other towns in the Netherlands, the country prettier, but more like other not very pretty places; the Rhine flows broadly, but the Rhine does not make up for the absence of the beautiful still canals, with their long reflections. Johanna did not care much for Arnheim.

At this moment she was sitting at the window of a house which stood a few yards back from the road, and in the summer was covered with pink roses, and she was apparently staring hard at the Rhine winding into the far distance in silver curves. Her eyes, however, betrayed that her thoughts were off on paths of their own, and an open letter lying in her lap might very well have had

something to do with the matter. It was, indeed, from Heer Wrangel. It told her that he hoped soon to reach Amsterdam, that his promotion was a matter of a few weeks, and that as soon as he could get away he should come to Arnheim. The letter was so full of confidence that it came like a whiff of sea air, and to Johanna Steen it seemed as if broad horizons, broad as that of the ocean itself, opened before and around her as she read the vigorous words. He drew a picture of their home, which he declared had been constantly before his eyes during his last voyage. Now it was likely that he would be at liberty for a time, and when that was ended would have employment on home stations; there was no need for looking further.

She had read and re-read the letter many times, not from doubt as to her answer, but because of the joy his words gave her. If they were a little masterful she liked them to be so. Now again to have a home, and a home such as Arent's words called up, was a happiness worth all the waiting and the grey tints of the past years. And if she had not yet written the word which was to put her own seal, as it were, to her own bliss, it was because there was an absolute luxury in dwelling upon what she was about to do, and because no words seemed quite worthy of the meaning they had to interpret.

So thinking and so looking, she saw, not the bare and wintry scene which lay before her, but something quite different, and much more beautiful. Where the cold clouds, charged with snow, lowered above the plain, she was only conscious of warm sunshine and the sweetness of spring; instead of being unclothed and leafless, the trees before her were thick with foliage and musical with the song of birds, and in her mind's eye a little home, embowered with roses and delicately spotless in

all its details, rose and claimed her admiration. There was an iron gate with a scroll-work name, expressive of joys within; a tiny canal should divide the garden from the cheerful road; a large flower-bed before the windows would be filled in early spring with tulips, next with gay cinerarias, lastly with the summer bedding plants, which Arent, who loved flowers so dearly, would certainly have ready for her. They would have a Frisian servant with a skull-cap of gold. Her store-room should be arranged with rows of green *trommeltjes*, neatly labelled; and it gave her a real pleasure to remember her little portion of old silver, packed away in her brother's house. But at this moment her aunt called her, and she ran downstairs, leaving her happy reflections behind.

Madame van Alphen, indeed, was not likely to treat them sympathetically. She was not very well pleased that Heer Wrangel should by his return disturb an arrangement which suited her admirably. It gave her the society of her niece whenever she wanted her, yet left her free from anything which could be called a tie, since Johanna could always go to stay with friends when absence was convenient. Besides, when she looked at her, she had a comfortable sensation of her own kindness; there is a decided satisfaction in being pleasantly provided with a means of doing one's duty which does not involve disagreeables, and, in her way, Madame van Alphen was a philanthropist. She was a large woman, who always wore black, and whose clothes gave the impression of being loosely festooned about her, and caught in here and there without any definite plan.

"You are come at last," she said.

"Have you wanted me?"

"I thought you would have gone this morning to inquire about those poor people who you told me were so

ill yesterday. You know I like to be kept informed of such cases. It doesn't do to be sympathizing one day and to forget all about them the next. Remember that, Johanna."

Johanna looked at her with a smile in her clear eyes.

"Oh, I won't forget," she said.

"Because sometimes I think you are inclined to let your own affairs stand in your way," persisted Madame van Alphen.

This time Johanna looked a little troubled.

"Have I so many affairs?" she asked.

"Well, this morning. You told me you had only one letter to write."

"But such a letter!" said the girl, smiling again.

"Ah, that's what I mean; you can think of nothing else. You let yourself be completely absorbed. It is bad for you and very bad for the man. I can see his character in the little you read to me; he will not let you have an opinion of your own, and he writes with the air of having only to hold out his finger and you will immediately dance for joy. Why don't you keep him in a little suspense? He will value you a hundred times the more."

"I am not afraid," said Johanna, with a glad ring in her voice.

"No, I wish you were. Of course you are not afraid. Each girl thinks her first lover absolutely different from all other men, and let's him see she thinks it—that's the worst. And now I suppose you will think of nothing else, and there will be no more good to be had out of you than there has been from Jetje, since the milk-boy began to pay his addresses. I believe in my heart it is only that his poor half-starved dog may get fattened on

our scraps. There is always some ulterior object with these men."

"Arent has not a dog," Johanna answered, laughing.

"He will have something else. Yes, indeed, shake your head as much as you like. Don't you acknowledge I have had some experience?"

"I was wondering how you could ever have made up your mind to a third husband."

"Because there is no danger when once you have reached a right estimate. Then you know what you are both worth. When that time comes, your letter will be a much simpler affair."

This was too far. Johanna grew pale.

"Hush, Aunt Mathilda!" she said sharply.

Madame van Alphen, however, only nodded her head a great many times.

"You will see; you will see," she said. "And you will never be able to say I did not warn you. Then, you have decided?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"You are absurdly foolish. Do you know how poor you will be? Here you have all the comforts you can wish for—carriage, piano, books, flowers—while there——"

"I shall have Arent."

Madame van Alphen held up her hands.

"It is idiotic. But I remark more and more that no one now thinks of anything beyond the whim of the moment; they do not cast a thought to the future."

Johanna looked at her with a shade of trouble still on her face.

"On the contrary," she said, "you would reproach me more justly if you said that I looked too longingly towards the future. It seems so full of happiness this

morning, that I tremble lest such happiness never could be mine."

Madame van Alphen, who prided herself upon argument, had opened her mouth to reply, when a manservant brought a telegram into the room. His mistress held out her hand, but he said respectfully—

"For the Freule Johanna, *mefrouw*."

"Are you sure? I expected one from the Hague; I should think there was some mistake, for certainly they ought to have sent off my cloak by this time.—Good Heavens, Johanna, what is the matter!" for the girl was standing in the middle of the room, white as a sheet.

"Clara!" she said faintly.

"Clara? Clara Steen? Is she ill? Oh, well, there is no need to be over-frightened. Clara is a delicate woman, and full of fancies. I dare say it is not so much after all."

Johanna looked at her strangely.

"She is dead," she said, in a tone which sounded as if it came from a great distance.

"Dead!" cried Madame van Alphen—"dead! You should not shock one so terribly! Clara Steen dead! It is impossible! Why, we have never even heard that she was ill! Dead!"

"Dead. And the little baby living. Oh, my poor Frans!"

"When did it happen?" asked her aunt in an awed voice.

"When? I do not know—to-day, I suppose."

"This morning," said Madame van Alphen, picking up the telegram. "How terribly unexpected! The last letter gave an excellent account of her—the last letter—why, it was from herself! Johanna, do not look so strangely; you quite frighten me!"

"You are right," Johanna said, pressing her hands over her eyes. "This is no time to give way to grief. I must go at once."

"You must go? Surely you need not!"

"Whom has Frans got but me?"

"Hilvardine."

"My poor Hilvardine, with her nineteen years!"

"At any rate, wait. Let us talk it over, and decide on what you had better do."

"No one must decide for me but my own heart," said Johanna, firmly. "Poor Clara always looked for me."

"Yes, they all look for you—always," said Madame van Alphen; but she spoke under her breath, and there was a touch of soft compunction in her eyes, as she watched her niece. She said suddenly, "Listen, Johanna. You think I don't care for you; but I do, and what I say now I say altogether for your sake." Whether this were absolutely the case or not, Madame van Alphen was firmly convinced of it. She went on impressively, "I warn you against doing anything rash. If you go to your brother's house now, you will not easily leave it again."

"I cannot think of that," said Johanna.

She spoke so impatiently that probably the warning fell in with something in her own heart. Madame van Alphen looked at her.

"You can think of Arent Wrangel," she said slowly.

"He will not wish to keep me back," Johanna answered at once. And then, after a momentary pause—"If he did, he has not the right."

"Not the right, when he will be your husband!"

"But Frans *is* my brother. Don't you see? The tie which God has already formed stands first in strength."

Madame van Alphen shook her head.

"That letter is from a man who expects everything to give way to his own will."

Johanna looked at her as resolutely as ever, but a little startled expression just touched her eyes.

"I must not talk any more," she said, hastily. "There is a train in an hour."

"Bert shall fetch a *vigilante*. Clara dead! To me it seems inconceivable! And the poor little baby left with such a helpless man as Frans for its only parent! Mind you write to me, and, for pity's sake take advice from your friends before you do anything rash. Well, go, and I will send some one to help you."

She was as good as her word—nay, better, for she came herself, laden with black garments of extraordinary shape and trimming, which she was anxious to thrust into Johanna's box. It was kindly meant, and the girl's heart warmed to the unusual care, though she managed to reject the garments. There was barely time to get through all that she had to do, and she was glad of it, otherwise the revulsion of feeling from that morning joy, which already seemed to have flitted far away, to this dark sorrow which, having struck, yet threatened, might have been too sharp. Now for a little while she could keep the full realization at bay.

The *vigilante* arrived, and Madame van Alphen called her impatiently. When Johanna came down the steep stairs, she put her arms round her and kissed her white cheeks.

"Let me hear every particular; and remember, remember, that I have warned you. Don't be led into rash promises. Frans will understand nothing but that he wants you, and, unless I am extremely mistaken, other people will be the same. Consider yourself. No one else will consider you, take my word for it."

When Johanna had reached the old town in which her brother lived, had rattled along the stony streets, across bridges, and by the side of canals, it had been, so far as outward senses are concerned, an almost unconscious journey. She hardly noticed the grey tower of the cathedral, nor the people in the street who gave her looks of sympathy; she saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing, though from time to time she shivered, and the snow, which had long threatened, was beginning to fall in large single flakes. But when the carriage turned the corner of a street, and stopped before a white many-windowed house, sights and sounds suddenly reached her with a keenness which was agony. She noticed everything—the closed windows, the already desolate air, the footmark on the white steps, upon the whiteness of which poor Clara was wont to pride herself. The door opened as she went up, and the first figure on which her eyes fell was that of the *aan-sprecher*, the messenger of death, in his black clothes and long crape streamers. Betje, the maid, was giving him a bundle of notes to deliver, according to custom, to friends and acquaintances. It struck Johanna with wonder that this should have been already done; it struck her also, quite inconsequently, as a ghastly thing that his foot should have been the one to mar the unsullied whiteness of Clara's steps. Betje on seeing her began to cry; Johanna was quite tearless.

“Where is mijnheer?” she demanded.

It seemed that he was in the upstairs sitting-room; but before Johanna had done more than reach the bottom of the curious old whitewashed winding stairs, she heard her name called from the top, and a young girl came hastily down to meet her. She stopped when she saw the *aan-sprecher*.

"That horrible black raven!" she exclaimed. "Betje might have kept him out of sight, if she could do nothing else, if only from remembering how much *she* disliked him to come to the house."

"My poor Hilvardine!"

The girl had kissed her quickly, had turned, and was going before her up the stairs. On the landing she stopped.

"You had better not waste your pity," she said calmly. "My father will tell you I feel nothing, and he is right. It all seems something quite outside, not touching me in the least. I dare say you are shocked—I can't help it. If you have anything you want to ask before we go in to him I can answer you. Do you wish to know anything?"

But Johanna, looking at her, felt questions to be impossible. Hilvardine's beautiful eyes were fastened upon hers with a kind of burning gloom. She would rather have seen the wildest grief than this restrained fire, consuming inwardly. She was dumb, and the next moment the girl, turning away, pushed open a door and passed before her into a small room.

The town councillor was sitting with his elbows on a round table, and his head buried in his hands. Two little children were crouched in a window-seat, looking frightened rather than sorry, and gazing open-mouthed at their father, whose grief evidently terrified them. Johanna hurried to her brother, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Frans! Dear Frans!" she said tenderly.

He started at her voice, and lifted his head, but the next moment buried it again, only clasping her hand in his own and remaining speechless. She tried all the loving words she could think of without avail. A sad

shake of the head was the utmost she could extract until a baby's feeble cry was heard not very far off, and he lifted his head, and said impatiently—

“Will no one spare me that torture?”

Before Johanna could speak Hilvardine quitted the room, and he resumed his attitude. Johanna had a theory that in sorrow it is well to fall in with people's own fancies instead of attempting to comfort them against their will, so she sat patiently silent. But at last, when he raised a haggard face and stared at the children, she said softly—

“She has left you many to care for. For their sakes, dear Frans!”

“What are they all put together in comparison with her?” he returned, in a dreary voice. “Johanna, never any man had a wife like her, and without her I have nothing to look forward to in existence. What is a poor wretch to do who has come to that pass?”

She hesitated.

“It is an impossible one,” she said then.

“Is it? I, who am tasting its bitterness, know better.”

She looked at him with great pity, but repeated firmly—

“It is impossible, but even were it so, you would still have to look forward for your, for her, children. You are not left alone. And she was so proud of them, remember. I am afraid poor Hilvardine has had a great shock.”

“Oh, Hilvardine! As for her——” He did not finish the sentence; it died away in a sort of angry querulousness, and he made an expressive movement of his hands.

“She is very young. Such a sorrow as this may take a great effect upon her,” said Johanna soothingly.

"I hope so, I hope so," he said quickly. "Her selfishness saddened her mother's last days."

"Children," said Johanna, beckoning to the little ones, who had been whispering together on the window-seat, "go now and see if you can find Constans, and ask her to show you the pictures in the great history book till I come." When they were gone she said appealingly, "Dear Frans, do not blame their sister before the little ones. They will have to look to her."

"Never to her," he exclaimed, getting up and beginning to pace the room. "I hope I shall not be reduced to that pass. You will not desert me, Johanna?"

"Oh no," she said, with a generous impulse which was irresistible. "I will do all that I can; but Hilvardine is not a child any longer."

"She is worse. She made her mother miserable. Yesterday—it was but yesterday—," he went on, with a shudder,—“and she, always at home with her, might certainly have seen that she was ill and weak; whereas I, out at my work, could not know it. And she was always bright with me."

Johanna perceived that reproaches were inwardly stirring, and leading him to shift the responsibility on his daughter. It was not a very strong view to take of his character, but perhaps the woman who loved him best hardly credited him with strength. She said tenderly—

"At any rate, now you will forget all unkindnesses and frets, and remember only that they are her children."

"Her children! yes, and gave her so much grief!"

"Please don't speak of that, dear Frans. Now she has no more grief."

He flung himself again on his chair.

"But I—I am left alone to bear everything."

She looked at him with great compassion. There was a fretfulness mixed with his sorrow which made it difficult to comfort him.

"Not alone," she said softly. And then she added, "I was very grateful to you for telegraphing."

"It had nothing to do with me. I can't think of those things—of anything. Make what arrangements you like, only don't ask me."

"Clara's brothers?"

He put up his hands as if to ward off a blow. "You mean well, but it's torture," he said. "At such a time can't some one be found to act for me?"

"We will do all we can," said Johanna, kissing his forehead.

Her heart was heavy for her brother, and yet she knew there was something unmanly in his thus leaving the burden for others. And Hilvardine's eyes haunted her. She went out of the room to seek for her, and found her in the nursery with the baby in her arms. Johanna came to her and kissed both. In the same restrained way, Hilvardine commented on the baby.

"*Mamaatje* wished it to be called Maria; of course my father will allow her name to be added," she said calmly. "I have a number of letters to write, so perhaps you will hold her?"

"Where is Constans?"

"She cries so much, she is better with the other children. Will you look at this list, and see if there is any one else?"

"My dear, rest, and let me do what is necessary."

"I can't rest," said the girl, shuddering.

"Because you are overwrought."

"No. Because I don't want to think. Has my father told you about me?"

Johanna would have given worlds to have been able to say "No." She murmured, "He seems hurt."

"He thinks I killed her. He won't look at me."

"When a man is in such trouble he doesn't know what he says."

"*Mamaatje* was vexed, but not like *that!*" went on the girl.

She was standing in the centre of the room, her eyes dilated, her chest heaving; she looked so beautiful that Johanna could hardly restrain an exclamation of wonder. And yet an inexplicable feeling of uneasiness mingled with the wonder. It was with difficulty she conquered it sufficiently to say—

"Very likely she understood you better. And if only you remember how much she loved your father, you will be patient, even should he not be quite just."

"Patient!" repeated Hilvardine, with a half smile. "Aunt Johanna, you don't know me very well."

"No," said the other, sighing, "not yet."

CHAPTER III.

"All scandal, take my word for it!"

IN the last chapter it was a wedding which had past; now it is a funeral. Cootje van Weede, radiant with youth and happiness, was at the Hague, rejoicing in the eager outbreak of spring, looking forward to long years as full, as rich, as tender; the town councillor's wife, tired out with her longer burden of joys and sorrows, slept in the quiet spot where they had laid her under the lime trees. The children had grown accustomed to their loss, and had ceased to ask questions. There was still a sensation in the house as of an empty place not yet filled up, but only Constans, whose feelings were

simple and easily communicable, talked much of the mother. Her husband seemed unable to mention the name which had been so often on his lips. They saw little of him except at meals. As soon as breakfast was over, and he had read aloud a chapter in the New Testament, he retired, coming in for luncheon at half-past twelve, for dinner at five, and finally at tea-time, when he read another chapter. When he was with them he hardly spoke. Hilvardine was equally silent; and Johanna, who thought it hard upon the children that their meals should be so dismally hushed, found it difficult to fight against the gloom.

She had now been for two months at her brother's, and there seemed no manner of reason why this time should not stretch itself unlimitedly. Nothing had been said about her going or coming; it was taken so completely as a matter of course that a pang would seize her when she began to estimate the growing strength of her bonds. She, of course, had written to Arent, and he had tacitly acquiesced in present necessity, the more readily, because something had occurred to delay the return of the *Prins Maurits*. However, she knew very well that this state of affairs could not go on for ever, though she had no clear idea how it was to end. As yet she had not grudged a day to Frans, and even Madame van Alphen, who came over to see her, could not suggest that she should at present leave. It was only that at times she was seized by a kind of haunting terror like that of the prisoner who sees walls slowly closing round him. She made resolute endeavours to shake off this feeling and to occupy herself only with the present, without suffering her thoughts to stray to that delicate future which danced mockingly before her eyes.

"What is all this about Hilvardine?" Madame van Alphen inquired.

"What has Frans told you?"

"He says she insists upon encouraging one of the students, a young Willem van Regensdorf. You ought to put an end to such nonsense."

Johanna was silent for a moment, and a shade of trouble was visible in her eyes. Then she said—

"I know there has been a something, but, so far as I am concerned, I have seen nothing at all. I hope it may be at an end."

"Hope! My dear Johanna, it is your place to *know*."

"But if I am not told? Hilvardine doesn't pour out her heart to me."

"Oh, she requires a firm hand. There is no good in your being here if you can't manage those girls."

Johanna flushed.

"You forget their father."

"Oh!" said Madame van Alphen, turning away. Presently, however, she came back, and added, "I have been trying to find out what gives Hilvardine that peculiar beauty."

"Her eyes," suggested Johanna with an effort. "They are grey, and both upper and under lashes are dark and long."

"No; I think it is that both eyebrows form one arch, and that this line is exactly repeated by the upper lip. She is very pretty; certainly she requires a firm hand."

When Johanna thought over these opinions, she felt as if her thinking required to be courageous.

There was plenty of occupation in the house. Seven children—Hilvardine, Constans, two schoolboys, Nicolas and Hector, Luce, Hendrik, and the baby Maria. The town councillor could not be called rich, and the servants

were young. For house government, however, Johanna had a natural aptitude; but she was not so quick in reading character, and she found a perpetual problem in Hilvardine. She studied other girls with the vain hope of finding out the key; Hilvardine was unlike them all. Johanna's own moods were equable; Hilvardine's varied with every hour of the day—the smallest thing, or even nothing at all, and the skies were changed! She was a very bundle of contradictions, in which there might have been no singularity, but that they were unusually emphasized, and forced themselves upon your notice. She was frank, reticent, hot-tempered, unjust, prejudiced, haughty, shy, imperious, and lovable; yet there were times when you would have vowed no one of these adjectives belonged to her. She took her own way with so much vigorous determination, that when she yielded Johanna was annoyed because it was impossible to help admiring the grand air which made it seem like a queenly concession. Poor Constans, who was really sweet-tempered, was never half so much thought about, for her unselfishness was taken as a matter of course; and Johanna felt the injustice, yet was conscious of going with the stream like the others. The only person in the house who was quite out of its influence was the father. After her mother's death a fit of compunction had kept Hilvardine tractable for an unusual length of time; then came reaction, and the two fell further apart than before. It did not make Johanna's prospects more hopeful that there should be this antagonism between her brother and his eldest daughter. Nor had she the satisfaction of feeling that she had herself gained the girl's confidence. Her manner varied with her moods; it was sometimes affectionate, sometimes cool, sometimes it veered to mockery. Johanna took no notice of the changeableness, but went her way quietly,

and occasionally fancied that she had gained a point. She was never, however, permitted to enjoy actual confidence in this matter, for as often as not the good impression vanished at the first advantage taken of it, and an equally fleeting conviction that she had lost ground came uppermost.

One day in May she went to the Hague, and Hilvardine went with her, not with the best grace in the world, for she had chosen to take a dislike to Madame van Weede, and it was to her house they were bound. Johanna rather hoped she would have consented that Constans, who had a soul which yearned for small pleasures, should have gone in her place, but Hilvardine kept to her plan, although she grumbled. It was a bright day. The Hague was looking its gayest and prettiest in the sunshine, the swans were sailing in the beautiful sheet of water at the back of the Government buildings, the flowering shrubs were in full glory; but in spite of the fresh spring charm the streets were not in an attractive condition. The annual *kermesse* was, in fact, going on. The pancake and *wafelen* stoves were in preparation, the sellers of dried eels spread out their black heaps to view; all along the Buitenhof rows of booths were erected, and people strolled about between them; but there was no vestige of spontaneous gaiety—the old merriment of the fair was as dried up and as uninviting as the eels.

Johanna would not have thought twice about it, but that as they passed quickly through the streets towards the Princesse-gracht, she saw a young man in the distance take off his hat.

“Who was that?” she inquired, keeping any interest out of her voice.

"That? Oh, that was Heer van Regensdorf," said Hilvardine, not so successfully.

Johanna said no more. She hated herself for immediately wondering whether he had known they were coming. What was more natural than that a young student should find himself at the Hague at *kermesse* time? Nevertheless, the knowledge that he was there spread a vague disquiet over the day, in spite of Cootje's brilliant efforts. They drove in the beautiful wood, where the trees were in their first exquisite green. Hilvardine had never been in the *Huis in 't Bosch*, so they left her there with Monsieur van Weede, and the two friends drove away from the palace and about under the trees.

"This is something like!" said Cootje. "Now let us enjoy ourselves."

"Your husband would be much obliged to you if he heard."

"He might hear and welcome. It is easy enough to turn him out when he is in the way. But I can't deal with Hilvardine so summarily."

"No, I don't think you can."

"Oh, but I should be more summary than you are. Don't let her see you are afraid of her."

"Afraid!"

"Afraid. Not of what she may do to you, but of your not having the best effect upon her. Oh, I know you, Johanna, and that is what your mind is full of. Now, I give you a warning. One fear is just as bad as another with Hilvardine, and you had better hold your own."

Johanna laughed a little uneasily.

"Your penetration is terrible," she said.

Cootje did not care to enforce it. They met other carriages. People greeted her with some warmth;

evidently she was on the best of terms with her world. But presently, passing some ornamental water they found themselves in an alley of magnificent beeches. Then she turned, and said suddenly—

“And what of Captain—I see he is Captain—Wrangel?”

“I have not seen him,” said Johanna gravely.

“Did he not wish to see you?”

“I asked him not to come—at first. It seemed heartless towards Frans in his misery.”

“Oh.”

Her tone was significant, Johanna answered it with a little heat.

“Surely, Cootje, your own feeling would tell you that it would have been cruel?”

“I think you are sometimes cruel to the wrong people, my dear; that’s all. However, go on. When is his coming not to be considered heartless?”

“I suppose he will come soon.”

“And what will he hear?”

Johanna was silent for an instant, and then said, “I imagine he will see for himself that we must wait.”

“Ah, and that he will not like. Take care, Johanna?”

“Between Hilvardine and Captain Wrangel you are dreadfully oracular,” said Johanna, trying to smile. “Have you been lately in the Chamber of Deputies?”

“I never go. It makes me too nervous when I expect Bernhard to speak. I am always sure that he will break down, or say something foolish, or otherwise cover himself with confusion. So my eloquence is all my own. However, you have had the last of it; we will go back to the palace.”

When they went to the station in the evening the pancake fires were all alight, Chinese lanterns dangling before the booths, bands playing discordantly, and every-

where there was din and tumult. Johanna had not lost the impression of young Van Regensdorf. It was with more dismay than surprise that when they reached the station she saw him standing at the door.

He came up at once. There was no lack of audacity in his manner or in his eyes as he looked at Johanna. Hilvardine presented him, accomplishing the act, as Johanna had to own, in a thoroughly natural manner. It was unlucky that what were, perhaps, unjust thoughts would so persistently spring up, for she could not help imagining that had Hilvardine been taken by surprise she would have shown less self-command. She was, however, quite calm. Johanna was much less so, for she was thoroughly provoked. She disliked all that she had heard of young Van Regensdorf, and under the circumstances she thought his forcing himself upon them the worst possible taste. When the train appeared and he opened a door, she passed on quickly to a carriage "*voor Dames*." Hilvardine had to follow, looking excessively displeased. Johanna expected an explosion. Presently, however, she found that she was smiling. When she caught Johanna's eye she smiled more.

"You are very unwise, Aunt Johanna," was all she said, and as no answer came, settled herself in the corner and fell, or pretended to fall, asleep.

Johanna, on her part, looked out of the window. The evening was very peaceful, the great expanse of sky which in Holland is as vast as if you were on the wide sea, was luminous with golden green light; all the meadows below lay dusky and dark. Suddenly a windmill rose black against the sky, then all the yellow light was reflected in a pool of still water, where innumerable frogs were croaking among the leaves of the marsh marigolds; overhead a star or two began to twinkle faintly. In mo-

ments of great quiet such as this Johanna's thoughts ever flew straight to that little home which existed only in her fancy; it seemed to her that she smelt the scent of the rose-garden, and that she and Arent, standing together in the porch, looked out into the cool night. Which was the reality—that or this? Some day, perhaps, we shall find that our real life stretches farther than we will own, and that the things we called dreams had an unexpected substance.

At any rate, the station presented a reality, and a disagreeable one. Almost as soon as the train stopped, young Van Regensdorf was standing at the carriage door. Evidently he proposed to himself the satisfaction of escorting them home, and Johanna felt more anger than a larger offence might have roused.

"Thank you," she said, standing still the moment they were outside. "Here we must wish you good evening."

"You will allow me to see you home," he said.

"No. Excuse me," said Johanna, gravely.

She got a little red, feeling as if he were laughing at her; but she thought his conduct unwarrantable, and would not even offer to shake hands with him. She was not quite sure what Hilvardine would do. To tell the truth, it was rather a relief to her to see that she was following; if she had insisted on a longer conversation Johanna's dignity might have been ill-treated. Johanna felt she ought to say something, but her companion presently saved her the trouble.

"So you are as unjust as the rest," she burst out.

"What is unjust? The not encouraging a young man of whom your father disapproves?"

"The disapproving is unjust."

"That I don't know about. I have not talked to him on the subject."

"But you know what he thinks?"

"Oh yes, certainly I know, because he told me what he felt when first I came. But we have never gone into it."

Hilvardine turned her eyes suddenly upon her. "Oh," she persisted, "I hate injustice!"

It seemed to Johanna that this required no answer. They walked on in silence. The streets were cheerful with people, standing about in knots outside the houses. At the end of one of these streets the old cathedral tower faced them, grey in the evening light. Johanna felt that Hilvardine meant to say more. She began again at last.

"What does my father know of young men, or of life? His own pursuits swallow him up; and then he lets himself be prejudiced by any idle rumour."

"But—that there should be rumours?" Johanna said, interrogatively.

"Ah, that is so ungenerous, that is like him! As if rumours did not fly about everywhere! I should like to know who is free. And when once an absurd story gains a hearing, every one who repeats it thinks they may add a little."

"That is what he has told you?"

"He? Yes; but it is the truth. These ungenerous speeches make me more determined not to give him up."

It struck Johanna at once that this speech had rather the ring of opposition than love about it; but she was irritated, and not very much in the mood for offering good counsel in the most effective way. She said quickly—

"Whatever you do, I hope you will not take dishonourable means of meeting."

"Dishonourable!"

"I call it so to-day. I suppose Heer van Regensdorf appeared at the Hague because you told him that we

should be there, and that he came back in our train trusting to my ignorance."

She intended her words to sting; but Hilvardine took them with unblushing calmness.

"Certainly I told him. We did not know but that you might be less prejudiced than the others. We hoped so."

"You were very charitable," said Johanna, with a laugh. "I suppose I ought to feel flattered by your readiness to think the best of me; I don't know but that I do. At the same time that doesn't affect the main point."

Hilvardine glanced at her doubtfully.

"We had better not talk about it any more."

"That is an easy way out of it; too easy, I am afraid. Oughtn't I at least to inquire what you mean to do?"

Johanna was miserably conscious that she was speaking with bitterness. She had a sharp conflict at work in her own mind at this time, and she was too young for victory not to leave a certain hardness. Hilvardine was the calmest of the two.

"We must go on until my father becomes more reasonable," she said reflectively.

"And meanwhile? Please let me understand."

"Meanwhile? We shall meet whenever we can, if that is what you mean. Neither of us are likely to mind silly talk."

"Oh, you have chosen a very superior position! You can hardly expect me, however, to admire it as much as you do yourselves? I must tell you, at any rate, that I shall be obliged to mention this meeting to your father."

"Obliged!" repeated the girl angrily. Then, checking herself, she said, "By all means. It makes no difference to us."

They were still walking through the streets over the uneasy *klinkers*, which give painful footing in every Dutch

town; presently they reached the white steps of the town councillor's house. Johanna was vexed with Hilvardine, and rather more with herself. She had a feeling as if she had been forced into a false position without having done anything to plant herself there; and yet, being there, she could not felicitate herself upon the way in which she had behaved. When Betje, with her white cap and the great gold spiral pins stuck in on a line with her eyebrows, opened the door, Hilvardine walked to the little table where lay the cards of visitors.

"Professor Mathius," she read out. "Oh, is he come? And who is this—Captain Wrangel?" She looked at Johanna, and, seeing her flush, remembered with a sudden anger.

On the card was written, "I will call at ten to-morrow."

CHAPTER IV.

"Alas, how easily Things go wrong!"

THE upstairs sitting-room in which Johanna was waiting before ten o'clock the next morning was the same room in which she had found her brother on the day when she arrived at the house. She remembered this suddenly as the clock struck, and the remembrance gave her a sufficiently uncomfortable feeling to make her for a moment wish that she had chosen a place with less dismal associations. But she felt ashamed of the wish, which seemed to have a superstitious touch about it, and she immediately checked her first impulse to go elsewhere, and stood at the window looking down on the garden at the back. It was full of trees, gravel paths, and as yet empty beds, a thin rain was falling, and it did not look very cheerful. Johanna had escaped from the children with some difficulty, for it was an hour which

she always devoted to them. Constans had all the goodwill in the world to help her, only she was not very capable, and if storms arose could but look piteous and imploring. In a storm Hilvardine, on the contrary, was quite in her element, no one had a finer power for subduing it, and it was possible that she even enjoyed the sense of dominion it gave her. But she was provokingly capricious in the exercise of her charm, so that, as far as she was concerned, peace or strife depended upon her own fancies at the moment. This morning she had chosen to take the disorderly side, had stirred tempers, roused opposition, and obliged Johanna to exert an authority which she disliked bringing forward. All this had ruffled her; she looked pale, worried, and not herself, as she stood at the window with a beating heart, listening for every sound. When the door opened and Arent stood before her, the room seemed to be whirling round. She began to wonder whether happiness sometimes killed people, and it needed all her efforts to keep herself from falling, so that the first impression he received was one of constraint. He had meant to take her in his arms; that did not now appear quite possible, and he stood a little awkwardly, holding both her hands and looking into her eyes, which were on the same level with his own. His face was broad and manly, there was an authoritative air about him, and his eyebrows contracted quickly when anything occurred to displease him. His first words seemed to take her into possession at once.

"So I have you at length, Johanna! You can't be expected to understand what it is to hunger for years for the sight of a face."

Her cheeks flushed. Could she not? But self-command was coming back, and she knew that if Arent fully realized what he was to her, her task would be pretty

well impossible. As it was, she felt as if she were tying cords round her own heart, when she said, with a laugh—

“Ah, you know I was never sentimental, and remember I warned you that you would discover a difference. When one’s mind is occupied with the problem of providing dinner for a dozen hungry people there is a great lessening of romance.”

He was hurt, as she saw at once; but though her heart smote her, she had a suspicion which both irritated and overjoyed her, that he understood her motive. Whether this were so or not, he made no allusion to her speech in answering it.

“When we were out on those far-off seas,” he said slowly, “and news came in such scanty portions that some of our men at times used to fancy themselves forgotten by the people at home, such thoughts never troubled me. I knew, as well as if she had stood by me and whispered the words into my ears, that there was one keeping me in her heart. And when I thought of her and of the little nest I hoped to make for her on shore, it grew so real to me that I used sometimes to feel as if it were there, and not on board ship, that I actually lived. Can you understand anything of this, Johanna?”

Her eyes were fixed with a troubled look on an old clock on the chimney-piece. When he spoke, she nodded quickly and slightly, without removing her gaze. He went on—

“The time was long, but such dreams helped me through it, and only grew more and more distinct and more dear. When I was ill——”

“You were ill?” she interrupted.

“I was down with fever at Batavia.”

“You never told me!”

"Where was the use? I was well again before I could write, and it would only have worried you."

"I shall not trust you again," she said reproachfully. He smiled.

"I wished to be in that home, then, I can tell you! The heat was tremendous; I used to get almost mad with longing for our shady roads, and, more than that, for the touch of your cool fingers. One night, when I am pretty sure they thought it was all up with me, I had a queer fancy that you came and laid them on my head. Did you ever do such a thing, Johanna? Well, you see, the conviction that you would be mine has helped to tide me over a great deal, more than you will ever know. And now I am here, and you have said a strange thing or two, which would trouble me if I believed them. Only I don't."

Captain Wrangel said these words with a quiet air of determination. Johanna trembled and struggled to steady her voice.

"You are very dear to me, Arent, and a little while ago, I, too, had those beautiful dreams of a home."

He had hold of one of her hands, and she found it hard to go on.

"Well?"

"Well—God does not always give us our dreams."

She said the words softly, and looked imploringly at him, for that first effort of hers to represent herself as changed having failed so ignominiously, she could only appeal to his sense of duty.

"There are no obstacles," he said, his brows contracting. "You have only to say whether you will marry me."

"Ah, it is not so simple."

"It is absolutely simple. I am in a position to marry, and you have nothing to consult but your own feelings."

He spoke calmly enough, but an angry flush was

spreading itself over his face. She glanced at him quickly.

"If it were so! But I cannot leave my poor brother and his children. Clara's death has left them you don't know how helpless; there is absolutely no one to take the head but me. Oh, Arent, indeed you must be reasonable."

"Is it I who am unreasonable? Johanna, you are not treating me fairly. Say at once that you don't care enough for me. If you feel that——"

"Oh, I don't, I don't!"

"There's nothing else to come between us. Your brother must get a good motherly woman to look after his house, and your eldest niece is no longer a child."

More troublesome than the children, Johanna reflected, with a sigh.

"It is absurd to suppose that two persons' happiness is to be sacrificed to your over-strained ideas of what is required from you. Doesn't your heart tell you I am right? or hasn't your heart anything to say to the matter?"

"Oh, Arent, I expected you to help me," said the girl, between laughing and crying. To her it was simply ludicrous that there should be a question about her own longings, when they were all arrayed on his side, and taking part against her words.

"Certainly I will help you in anything reasonable."

She glanced quickly at him. He was looking straight before him, and for the first time a dreadful fear grasped her heart that this resolution of hers might offend him so seriously that she would remain unforgiven. Such a possibility had never till now entered her head, and its pain turned her pale.

"Won't you understand?" she murmured.

"I confess I can't. Perhaps it's very dense. I always was dense, as you know; and when a thick-headed fellow

gets an idea into his brain, it's not so easy for him to get it out again. My notion was, that I had found a little girl true and faithful enough to stick to me through all obstacles."

"Arent, you are unjust; you hurt! I not faithful!"

"It doesn't strike me as much of a faith to go off as soon as something pulls in a contrary direction, and to leave me stranded."

He spoke with angry heat, and she gazed at him, white and bewildered. She had been quite aware that her task might be difficult, and he hard to persuade, but she had been absolutely blind to the danger of his misunderstanding her motives. Besides, he had a masterful air which frightened her, and took away the arguments which had beforehand seemed unanswerable. Her consternation made her answer seem cold even to herself.

"You forget what it is which pulls. I can't desert my brother in his trouble."

As if a practical answer came at once to her help, at this moment the door was burst violently open, and the two younger children rushed tumultuously into the room, pursued by Constans, looking hot and helpless.

"I could not help it, Aunt Johanna," she began apologetically. "I told them I was sure you would be very angry, and that very likely they would be punished; but Hilvardine has been telling them all sorts of stories, and she actually made them fancy there was some one here who had seen a sea-serpent. I told them there was no such thing. Of course, Aunt Johanna, I knew it was nonsense."

Hendrik had advanced boldly to his aunt's side; Luce stood and eyed Captain Wrangel reflectively with her finger in her mouth. Johanna was too much annoyed to have any sympathy with their inconvenient curiosity.

"You must go with Constans," she said impatiently. "I told you not to be troublesome."

"Yes, you must come with me," said Constans.

But when she advanced upon Hendrik, he broke into shrieks for Hilvardine, so loud and unappeasable that Johanna was almost thankful to see Hilvardine appear. Both children rushed at her.

"We may stay, mayn't we?"

"Send away that naughty Constans."

"He hasn't told us nothing yet."

"No," said Luce, conclusively. "You make him."

They looked defiantly at the others, but clung to Hilvardine with the delightful conviction that they had been disobedient, but that she would stand by them; and, to tell the truth, no picture could have been prettier. Hilvardine had never looked more charming—there was a flush of colour on her cheeks, and a brilliant colour in her eyes. Johanna saw Arent gazing at her in wonder, and as the next moment she gathered a quick impression of herself from a mirror on the wall, the contrast struck her like a blow. She saw herself pale and thin by the side of this radiant vision, and a sudden angry impatience seized her. Why should she be the one sacrificed? Sacrifice is not so difficult when it is appreciated, when praise, cheering voices, and encouragement are heaped upon the victim; but when the effort is unnoticed, even blamed, when you are haunted with the fear that it may be a fatal mistake and your magnanimity folly, then the iron, indeed, enters into the soul.

"I am very sorry they interrupted you," said Hilvardine softly. "It shall not happen again. Come, little ones!"

"Don't call it an interruption," said Arent, with some eagerness; "or, if it were, it came at a right time. You say the same, don't you, Johanna?"

Johanna turned slowly from the glass.

"I did not know we had finished," she said gravely.

Hilvardine gave them both a quick look.

"I don't think you have," she said, smiling. "Come, Luce; come, Hendrik!"

The children went away clinging to their sister; the two left behind remained for a few moments silent, then Arent said, removing his eyes from the door, "So that is Hilvardine!"

"Yes."

"She is very beautiful."

"Very."

Another silence. Then Arent went on. "Now that I've seen her, I can't in the least understand your scruples. Why, the children worship her!"

"They are fond of her, sometimes," said Johanna, feeling that she was producing an ungenerous effect. "You can't take in the ins and outs of a house by just seeing a bit of the life."

"One can make a pretty good guess, though," he answered lightly. "Perhaps you see too much. You have watched Hilvardine grow up, and know her little faults and weaknesses—I suppose she's got them like any other woman—and you don't know so well what she's fit for. If it were that second girl, now!"

"Constans, my poor Constans!—Why, she is the stay of the house!" cried Johanna desperately.

Captain Wrangel looked at her and laughed.

"I see what it is; you and the elder one don't pull together very well—don't understand each other. Take my word for it, you never will. All the more reason for you to shift your anchorings."

The girl looked at him. She felt almost reckless.

"Don't you see," she exclaimed with vehemence, "that it is Hilvardine herself who wants the care and the watching? The children are not half so much anxiety; Constans could mother them; the baby could come to me. It is Hilvardine!"

He smiled incredulously.

"I quite believe you think so, but an unprejudiced person would know better. You have only to look in her face. Come, Johanna, you are too good to give way to these womanly jealousies."

She looked at him with a start. An hour ago she would have laughed at the idea; indeed, she might have done so now, but that she was conscientious enough to be ready to suspect evil in herself when a charge was brought against her. Was she really jealous? She would have been extremely glad to assure herself that it was impossible, because to allow such a thing was to allow a great deal more. Yesterday she had not been jealous of her, of that she was certain. If she was now——! At any rate, the suspicion sealed her lips; she could not, or would not, defend herself. She felt bitterly that a barrier had sprung up between herself and Arent. How changed everything was since that morning! For then, although she dreaded her task, it was because she did not know how she could ever have the heart to withstand the tenderness of his entreaties; she had had no fear of real anger or reproach. Now she began to feel as if in his hot indignation and disappointment he had dropped entreaties, and that for ever. So much did she feel this, that she had no courage to return to the subject, yet she waited wistfully for him to do so. That he did not was in itself a sort of revelation. They talked with constraint, each being conscious of being held back from what was

nearest and dearest; and, in the midst of unsatisfying conversation the chimes struck half-past twelve, the luncheon-hour.

"I am afraid you will not see Frans; his duties as town councillor are dreadfully absorbing," said Johanna, trying to smile. "Perhaps by-and-by we might go to the Stadshuis and pull him out of his hole."

At luncheon things seemed to grow more and more unreal. There were the usual hungry, very hungry, children, the schoolboys, Nicolas and Hector, and the little ones, with whom Arent had already made acquaintance. Hilvardine was there, of course; but what was by no means a matter of course was that Hilvardine was making herself charming. She was gentle, she was kind, she was beautiful. It was not surprising that Captain Wrangel should look at her with interest, or that Johanna, who often saw her otherwise, should be incredulous. Evidently, and for some reason or other, Hilvardine took a mischievous pleasure in attracting their visitor, and it did not seem unlikely that he would be attracted. Johanna's was not a nature to bear this without resentment, and if he cooled it was certain she would not lift a finger to win him back. At luncheon she spoke little, and the burden of conversation fell upon Hilvardine.

"Your father is at the Stadshuis?" remarked Arent. "Is he there a great deal?"

"A great deal. Nearly always," said she gravely. "What do they do there? Nobody can believe that they are talking business all the time, and all the gossip in the place can't be spun out through those hours. They smoke and sleep, of course. That must be dull after a time. But then, to be sure, we are all dull."

"Not you, I am sure," said Captain Wrangel eagerly.

"Oh yes; I am the worst of all. You will have to

awaken us. It is not only the children who are expecting to hear delightful things."

And again a vague impression reached him that he was more welcomed by Hilvardine than by Johanna. Johanna was aware of it herself with a sensation of despair; it had come so quickly that she was bewildered. Only the day before her love had rested on such seemingly strong foundations that fears would have appeared shameful; and now, was it already melting away like a thing of mist? Her cheeks tingled with shame. If it had not been altogether a delusion, the only explanation was that during these years of absence Arent had in some rash fashion idealized her portrait, so that when the reality was before him he met with disappointment. She had encountered no such failure herself, but in this reflection there was little consolation, since when one of two fails it comes to much the same thing as a collapse in both.

CHAPTER V.

“O heart, how fares it with thee now,
That thou should'st fail from thy desire,
Who scarcely darest to inquire,
‘What is it makes me beat so low?’

“Such clouds of nameless trouble cross
All night before the darken'd eyes;
With morning wakes the will, and cries,
‘Thou shalt not be the fool of loss!’ ”

HILVARDINE went with the others to the Stadshuis—
Captain Wrangel urged it.

“But I don't know what will become of the children,”
she said.

“Don't you?” said Johanna, with an odd smile. “Well,
perhaps Constans will be able to tell you.”

Hilvardine laughed, and turned to Captain Wrangel.

“Aunt Johanna thinks I don't take my share of the
cares of the household.”

“You get your share of love,” he answered in a low
voice.

“More than my share, perhaps. But I wonder if we
might take the children to the Stadshuis?”

“You know your father would not allow it,” Johanna
answered, trying not to show her vexation, for such a
proposition was certain to increase the clinging to Hil-
vardine, and to place herself and Constans on the ob-
jecting and unpopular side.

“Ah, well, another day, my little ones!” said the girl,
with charming kindness. “And listen, I have something
to tell you. A great delightful secret!”

“What—what!”

“We will have *wafelen* to-night in honour of Captain
Wrangel!”

It was she who seemed to give him the welcome, to try to make a little *fête* of his return. Johanna felt the anomaly, but could not move; it was as if she were turned into stone. The children capered away, quite consoled.

The wind blew coldly as they went along the streets; a grave sweet chorale was chiming from the beautiful cathedral tower, under which they passed. It is but a fragment left standing alone; but what a fragment! So noble in its proportions, so softly warm in its reds and greys, so homely in its small tufts of grass and weed growing out from this and that niche! A little window from which a sun blind projects nestles far up, in front of it stand a few pots of gay flowers. Who lives in that little kingdom, above all the earthly stir and turmoil down below? Johanna used to look and wonder; to-day she looked and wondered with a touch of envy added which she had never known before.

And yet Arent was by her side!

As they went up the broad stairs of the Stadshuis they met Heer Steen coming down with a number of other gentlemen. He looked exceedingly astonished at sight of his sister and daughter, and yet more bewildered when he was called upon to recognize Captain Wrangel. He did not give the impression of being at all prepared to see him, so that Johanna felt with a pang as if here were an added touch of inhospitality from her nearest relation. She had carefully informed Frans of his coming, but Heer Steen had a vague way of treating unacceptable facts which was very effective.

"Ah, I remember," he said, looking at Arent. "Back from a voyage, aren't you? And on shore for a time?"

"Yes, for a time," said the other man shortly.

"Father," said Hilvardine boldly, "you must persuade

Captain Wrangel to stay the night instead of returning to Amsterdam."

It was impossible for the town councillor, however reluctant, to avoid endorsing this invitation.

"If you will put up with us," he said. "It's a dismal house to ask any one to come into. But the girls do their best. I'm not complaining."

"Thank you. I should be glad, for there's a good deal I have to talk over," said the sailor frankly.

"You must talk to Johanna, then," said the other man, with an air of alarm. "She arranges things; I find I have no head left for decisions."

"Oh yes; it is for Johanna to decide," said Arent significantly.

Meanwhile Johanna appeared to have been separated from him. One of the gentlemen who were coming down the stairs with Heer Steen stopped and held out his hand to her. He was a tall man, still young, with a strong, rugged face, and seeing that she looked at him in perplexity, he said—

"You have forgotten me, Freule Johanna; but as I have no intention of forgoing my advantages, I shall remind you of a day at Zaandam, five years ago, and our walk among the windmills."

"Professor Mathius!" exclaimed Johanna, with pleasure. "I remember now seeing your card yesterday; but I have had a good deal on my mind, and, to be honest——"

"You had forgotten. "That's a point of sympathy between most people."

"Have you left Leyden?"

"Yes; and came here a week ago. And already it seems as if I had never been away. It is wonderfully unchanged."

"Don't think so, or you will be disappointed," she said, with a good deal of earnestness. "There is the cathedral tower, to be sure; but hearts are not stone, and people do not remain the same."

He answered her without apparently noticing the bitterness in her tone.

"I should have remembered that change has come harshly enough to you. I miss Madame Steen's kind face more than I could have believed possible. And there is another change. Hilvardine has blossomed into a woman. She is very beautiful."

"Every one is struck by her beauty," said Johanna, putting all the cordiality she could into the words.

"And it is not the uninteresting sort of beauty which has nothing more to say for itself. It is full of promise."

"That is the advantage of being nineteen."

He gave her a quick look.

"Does she plague you? She was always rather a turbulent character and spoilt by her mother. I'm not sure, however, that she would not respond best to spoiling."

"That's a remedy which can't be produced at pleasure."

"No; it would have to be spontaneous. Still——"

He was looking again at Hilvardine; he seemed to be considering. At last he called out—

"Steen, can't we be more hospitable? Haven't we anything to show? Come, I'll wager you're too old inhabitants ever to have seen the museum?"

"Rusty locks and old stones!" cried Hilvardine irreverently.

But she turned with a laugh, and ran up the stairs, while the town councillor escaped into a room furnished with tables and green baize. The girl managed to keep both gentlemen at her side; Johanna felt shut out into

the cold. A young married couple joined them, and there was plenty of merriment over grim things enough, though the chief attraction was the two hundred year old doll's-house, with its exquisite minute works of art, its ceilings, its ivories, its paintings, its porcelain, its silver, and its lace. Johanna was too sick at heart to take pleasure in these microscopic treasures, and then was vexed because she knew herself to be cold and unsympathetic; it did not give her much consolation to be persuaded that no one noticed her abstraction. By-and-by she found herself staring out of a window overlooking the busy streets, the canals sunk in their midst, the fish market, and the cathedral tower. Overhead clouds rushed wildly before the wind which was sweeping strongly up from the south-west, the trees bordering the canals swayed to and fro, shutters banged, and everything foretold a storm. Johanna felt a passionate longing to escape from her companions into the rush and whirl of this tempest; if she could go out alone and battle with it, it seemed to her as though at the same time she might battle with other forces within her, as wild and fierce. She felt as if there were contingencies to be faced, resolutions to be made, and for these she must have air, air and space—here she could not breathe. Just then Hilvardine touched her arms.

“The Hofdijks will walk home with us.”

She made up her mind in a moment, lingered behind the others as they passed into another room, and the next moment ran down the broad staircase into the open air. She was careless of what might be thought; careless even of Arent's anger, for, indeed, she felt that unless she took counsel with herself, it was likely that she might be betrayed into some sharp speech of irritation which might wreck for ever what chances

of happiness yet remained to her. Her longing was for open space, for a great expanse of sky, such as is the birthright of the Dutch. There was a broad canal leading seawards from the town, where she hoped to find this, and, walking swiftly, she soon left streets and houses behind her, and looked across wide level meadows where on the low horizon little red toy houses nestled among their trees. The meadows were intersected by tiny water-courses, which kept the black and white cattle in their own pastures; bulrushes and marsh marigolds fringed these miniature canals, and water-lilies shone up from their unruffled waters. But Johanna cared nothing for such peaceful beauties; what she had come to seek, and what gave her an immediate sense of invigoration, was the wild rush of the wind swooping down on the flat country with an almost irresistible power. Clouds which otherwise would have poured out their load of rain were driven helter-skelter, broken up, torn, tattered; and in such a vast sky the effects of this tumult were far grander and more impressive than elsewhere; you got a magnificence of form, a grouping of effects which compensated for want of both in the world about you. The broad *trekvaart* to the left, by the side of which Johanna paced, had its usually placid surface greatly stirred by the violence of the wind. One or two lumbering, round-bowed, audaciously painted boats were coming quickly towards the town, their brown sails swelling, while the only *trekschuyt* which had been making its slow way against the wind had given up the attempt, moored itself closely to the bank, and the whole family, including the eldest son who had been towing, were now engaged in drinking tea outside the small cabin. Their dog barked at Johanna as she passed.

She was glad of the storm and the turmoil. It was

more in harmony with her feelings and the utter disturbance of her thoughts than sweeter serener weather could have been. The struggle which it cost her to keep her footing, the freshness and saltiness of the wind, did her actual physical good, by working off some of the irritation which had been overmastering her. Already she could reflect on Hilvardine's conduct with the wish to be fair, not to exaggerate; and on Arent's wavering allegiance with an acknowledgment that he had been tried by the morning's disappointment. She was not naturally patient, but she had a strong sense of justice, at which Cootje often railed. It was true that only the day before she would have smiled at the idea that where Arent was concerned she might be called upon to mete out justice; but that was yesterday, and this to-day, and a gulf lay between the two. If, as some people seem to suppose, romance consists of flinging to the winds all considerations which interfere with the swing of one's emotions, Johanna was not romantic; she had a very complete sense of duty which kept the oscillation well within bounds. If she were persuaded that it was right that she should go on living with her brother, and trying to do the part of a mother to somewhat reluctant children, there was no real doubt in her mind that she would do it, though she began to understand now that she had never sufficiently counted the cost. She had imagined that Arent would have been content to allow their marriage to wait for a couple of years, by which time Constans would have grown into a sounder authority; she now realized with dismay that you can't dispose of men, even of lovers, in this easy fashion. The worst was, that even this point of view, painful as it was, was the best that fate was offering her, for if Arent were attracted by another, the separation would indeed be hopeless. She

had a generous heart, and could not have judged him harshly if she would; forgiving was easy enough, but—suppose he should not want to be forgiven? There was a tedious comfort in the reflection that time would decide for her; uncertainty sometimes seems the chief difficulty of life. Then she told herself it was impossible she could long remain in doubt, for either Arent would come quickly back, or he would more unmistakably betray his feelings. In either case her course would be clear, and her heart gave a little premonitory flutter as she tried to say this with assurance; if, as has just been admitted, she was not romantic, the want of romance did not shut her out from suffering. Nevertheless, things had grown clearer to her since she had come out into the freedom of the air. She no longer felt alone; with this vast expanse of sky around her, God seemed nearer, help at hand.

She walked on mechanically, and without realizing how far she had gone, past the cherry orchards, to which by-and-by the children would be clamouring to come, past the solitary, rather dejected country houses, placed near the road and planted thickly round with trees. In the summer, people and flowers would give them an air of hilarity, but as yet they presented a morose aspect. She did not notice landmarks until she came upon an open space, where a gaunt and weather-beaten wind-mill rose on her right, and a drawbridge, with a picturesque windlass sticking up, crossed the canal in a leisurely fashion. Then Johanna's orderly soul gave a dismayed start, and she instantly turned and hurried homewards, wondering how she was to get back before the half-past five o'clock dinner. The distance looked grey and unimpressive, but there was plenty of excitement among the driving clouds overhead, and she walked very fast now that the wind was behind her. In spite of her ab-

sorbing subjects for thought, she had much to spare for her own probable unpunctuality; that allegiance to duty which was her strong characteristic running into a multitude of little channels sometimes inconveniently small, so that she was not incapable of saddling herself with a conviction of wrongdoing for even so minute a failure as her non-appearance at dinner.

When she reached the town and crossed a bridge at a busy intersection of canals, two ways were open to her—one through the streets, the other by a kind of public garden walk. She chose this; it was the pleasantest, especially at this time of year, when all the flowering-shrubs and trees, pink and white hawthorns, and red horse-chestnuts, were in bloom, and strewed the grass underneath with their blossoms. Few people were to be seen; a dog was dragging a cart laden with shining brass milk-pails, two or three boys were careering about on tricycles, and some children were playing with the fallen chestnut flowers. Presently Johanna's eye fell on a couple who were well ahead of her, and with whom trotted a square little girl, whose back reminded her of Luce. Having got hold of this association, she felt a vague wonder that the young lady should also resemble Hilvardine, but the next moment the wonder became a startled certainty. Certainly it was Hilvardine, and, though she was not sufficiently familiar with young Van Regensdorf to recognize him, she had an immediate conviction that he was her companion. She hurried indignantly forward without succeeding in overtaking them. She had no doubt, but, if she had, it would have been decided by seeing Hilvardine enter her father's house, while the young man walked on. Johanna followed so quickly that she was in the hall before the girl had gone

upstairs. Hilvardine turned without the smallest sign of confusion.

"Where have you been, Aunt Johanna?" she inquired. "What made you vanish like a meteor? There was a talk of sending a searching-party."

"Pray, was it that which took you out with Heer van Regensdorf?" demanded Johanna indignantly.

Hilvardine looked hotly at her, then laughed and answered carelessly, "Nothing took me out with Heer van Regensdorf, as you delicately suggest. I was out, and he joined me."

"Against your father's wishes!"

"Oh, if you like," said the young girl, in the same tone. "Yes; against my father's wishes. I don't consider myself bound by those wishes, because they are unreasonable."

Johanna reflected for a moment, and then said—

"Do you really consider yourself a better judge than all of us?"

"Certainly I do. Much better. No one knows the circumstances half so well. Aunt Johanna, let me warn you that you are unwise to meddle."

"I am really obliged to you," said Johanna, with a laugh. "Is that meant for a threat?"

Hilvardine looked angry. She had lost her coolness, and the hand she laid on the balusters trembled.

"One of these days you will understand," she said, with marked significance.

"Perhaps," said the other. "That possibility doesn't affect the present question. If your father's wishes don't influence you, he must give more definite commands. You can't walk about with Heer van Regensdorf."

"Shall you recommend him to lock me into the house?" inquired the girl audaciously.

"I shall advise him to appeal to your respect for your mother's memory," replied Johanna with extreme gravity.

Hilvardine flushed crimson, turned sharply, and flung at Johanna the words, "Aunt Johanna, I hate you!" before rushing upstairs and leaving the other weighted with an added trouble.

CHAPTER VI.

"I've been so long remember'd, I'm forgot."

"What a bankrupt am I made
Of a full stock of blessing!"

JOHANNA was spared the disgrace of unpunctuality. She arrived in the dining-room before the silent saying of the grace. She saw directly that Arent was displeased with her, and he emphasized his displeasure by asking no questions. Her heart sank, and it was a relief to find that Professor Mathius was of the party. Constans, too, who often acted as a safety-valve, began with a torrent of small exclamations.

"We have all been wondering so much what had become of you, Aunt Johanna. Professor Mathius thought that you had come home to see whether I was treating the children badly; but, of course, that was only his fun. *I* said you must have remembered some message that you had meant to give—wasn't that it?"

"Not quite that," said Johanna gently. "Was I very rude? You must all forgive me."

Arent went on eating his soup. She had her eyes on him, but he would not look up.

"I'm the one to apologize, really," said Mathius quietly. "I forced an entertainment upon you which you had no

chance to escape from except by running away. Another time, Freule, you must protest in good time."

"Where's Hilvardine? Late, as usual," said her father irritably. "Take away the soup; I won't have things kept back for her."

"She went out with Luce. I wonder if I had better go and see whether they are come in?" suggested Constans, half rising.

"No; sit down," said Heer Steen. "She knows the time as well as you."

Before Johanna could speak, Captain Wrangel said—

"She has come in. I heard her voice just now. Besides, your clock is fast."

"One minute, perhaps."

"Three," said Arent in a decisive voice.

Soon after this, as Johanna was mixing the salad, Hilvardine appeared. Arent immediately jumped up. His reception of her was so different from that which he had given to Johanna that the professor began to frown. Heer Steen contented himself with a remark under his breath; to tell the truth, he was sufficiently afraid of his eldest daughter to prefer finding fault with her behind her back. She attempted no explanation, and contented herself with eating her dinner in silence, and smiling now and then on Captain Wrangel, who talked in a low voice. No one was very cheerful. Johanna was trying to beat away a dull pain in her heart, Professor Mathius was preoccupied. He had left the town when he was twenty, now he was thirty-two, and to come back to an old home after twelve years' absence, is to find ghosts sitting in empty places. Madame Steen had been particularly kind to him, and in her own house her loss seemed so much nearer, that it struck him as strange, almost unfeeling, of those nearest and dearest to her, to

be sitting where she had sat, and acting as though nothing had happened.

Then, knowing something of the history of Arent and Johanna, it was impossible to imagine that things were going as they should be between these two. And what was Hilvardine about? Mathius found himself frowning again as he watched them, and reflecting whether anything could be done. Captain Wrangel's manner did not particularly please him. He thought it slightly overbearing, but it was possible that women might not consider it objectionable, and he had to own that there was nothing piratical or theatrical about it; it was, most likely, merely the outcome of a habit of giving orders. "If Johanna likes it!" he said, lifting his shoulders. But, again, even if she liked it, was it all right? And again, what was Hilvardine doing? If half the questions which rose in people's hearts that evening had been put into words, a very storm would have rattled down. As it was, it was only an unremarkable evening, to all outward appearances, that passed. Johanna wondered afterwards without ever arriving at an answer, why the smell of lilac, which she used to like, could not reach her without a sudden impression of pain coming with it. She was aware that she now and then met the professor's eyes charged with a little friendly anxiety, and the consciousness of this made her at the end of the long evening carry out an idea which had flashed upon her at its beginning. Mathius had known Clara well; for her sake, he might advise her about young Van Regensdorf, for she had already found that to apply to Frans was only to cause irritation. As he wished her good-night he saw that she hesitated.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he said in a low voice.

"I hardly know," she answered, looking doubtfully at him.

"Will you let me judge?"

"Thank you——" She paused again, then added quickly, "If you will come and see me one day——"

"I will certainly come."

"Thank you," she repeated.

It was evident that she was troubled and perplexed, and as he walked away into the windy night, he found himself considering how it was likely he could help her. It will be seen by this that he was not one of those persons who let other people's affairs drift along without troubling themselves as to where they are floating; on the contrary, he was often annoyed by an overmastering impulse to go to the rescue, for it is a hundred times less troublesome to leave things alone, and to pass by on the other side. But though he had sometimes forced himself to be passive, he could never keep up this position when once the smallest sign of distress had been made; and many a student had been almost unwillingly dragged out of his difficulties by the strong, wise brain and untiring energy of the professor. Not, be it remarked, scot free. There were some bad quarters of an hour in his study, during which the victim would have writhing doubts as to whether the consequences of any scrape could be so terrible as his own sensations. He would be let down very low before he was sharply pulled up; but once up, it was the professor's aim to keep his self-respect at a wholesome working point. At Leyden, his influence with the young men had been remarkable, for he had the power of ruling without requiring to fall back upon outward signs of authority. In his new sphere he had not yet consciously made himself felt; he had, indeed, somewhat held aloof. But this would not last

long, since his mind was of the order which cannot see a grievance without wanting to redress it, nor a hole without mechanically considering what patch would fit the case.

Excessive was Frans Steen's dismay when his sister spoke to him the next morning on the subject of her marriage. He had an ingenious turn for evading the disagreeable and the definite, and he tried hard to slip out of the interview; but Johanna was resolute.

"Arent has a right to require an answer," she said more than once.

"He thinks so, no doubt; and you, of course, think with him," said Frans irritably. "He is one of those men who believe they have a right to require whatever they demand. Well, follow your own wishes. I've no right to ask anything."

"You should not say that," said Johanna gravely. "If it were so, I should not be here now."

"You can judge for yourself. Do you want me to tell you what this house is like? Good Heavens!" he continued, pacing up and down the room, "I should think it was plain enough. Can you say that you consider Hilvardine a fit head for the household? For myself, it matters little enough. My misery is so great that added discomfort is of little difference; but I thought you cared for the children."

Johanna was looking at him. She did not seem to feel the injustice of his words; her whole mind was taken up with considering.

"I do not feel that I am very successful with Hilvardine," she said at last. "It does not seem to me that either you or I have got hold of the key to her character. She might do better with more responsibility thrown upon her."

"That is nonsense—sheer nonsense!" he said uneasily. "Say the truth, Johanna; say you wish to leave us."

There was a pause. Then she said slowly—

"I will not leave you at present if you feel my presence necessary for your and the children's comfort; but I do not know whether Arent will agree to wait."

"If he loves you he certainly will."

"Perhaps," said Johanna, with a faint smile.

Both were silent for a while. Frans would have been glad to escape, but something in Johanna's face told him that she would not allow the interview to end so abruptly. It was true. She knew that Arent would not be satisfied with the vague message which was all she had yet to give him; yet she pitied her brother. His was a face which quickly took the impress of his moods; when she glanced at him now she was dismayed by the sad lines which seemed drawn all over it. She was not blind to his weakness, but her generous nature was ungrudging in love, and both she and Clara always tried to shield him from annoyance. At the same time, Arent demanded satisfaction; he was not a person to be shielded, but a man who had clear notions of his own rights; she dared not go to him with no more to say than had been said the day before. She spoke at last very gently.

"That is settled, then, dear Frans; but even if—if Arent consents, he will ask me to fix some definite time, and I do not see that I can refuse it. Do you think six months?"

"Impossible! How shall we be better off in six months?"

"Constans will be older."

"Constans! If you will be so obstinate, you must tell him that when six months are over you will think about it."

"No," said Johanna firmly. "What I say to him now

I must carry out. I will ask him to wait six, nine, or twelve months: decide yourself which it is to be, but whatever you decide the time shall be fixed. It is possible"—— She hesitated.

"What?"

"That he will refuse."

"And then?"

"Then, I shall not be his wife," she said after a pause, in which the blood seemed to rush back to her heart.

Frans looked at her with a little compunction.

"Poor Johanna!" he said. "But you might be all the happier."

She smiled. "What time shall I give him?"

"A year, then. Not less, for pity's sake!"

"Very well—a year."

As she said the words she knew that Arent would not consent. She spoke them very quietly, and Frans never guessed at the wild rebellion which surged up in her mind when she rested her elbows on the window-sill, and looked at the trees which grew outside. She—usually so self-controlled—felt a rush of indignation against the dreary future, which she saw even more plainly than the trees—a wild questioning of Providence. Such rushes, such turbulent beating at the bars, such passionate longings for the happiness which hangs close to the lips, and needs only an outstretched hand to snatch it, are common enough. But, thank God, there are faithful hearts which, though shaken, can stand fast through the turmoil. Self-sacrifice may be mistaken, but it is always noble. Johanna looked forward into the years, looked at the cares of this disjointed household, at Hilvardine's moods, at her brother's pale and querulous face. There stretched her future, cold, grey, and repellent; there, on the other hand, the tender visions of

past days called and beckoned. Suddenly she rose up, and going quickly over to Frans, kissed him on the forehead. He did not notice that as she reached his chair she staggered slightly, or that the cheek which brushed his was cold as ice. Such signs are not intelligible to all, and he was more occupied with himself than with Johanna.

After the kiss she went out of the room, and walked without hesitation down the stairs and into the garden. This was a long narrow strip, so thickly planted with trees that their dense foliage shut out the house when you sat in a small summer-house at the end of the garden. In front of this building Captain Wrangel was pacing backwards and forwards.

She came slowly, and he was sufficiently absorbed with his own thoughts not to be aware of her approach, so that when he raised his head and saw her standing before him, pale and almost trembling, he started as at something unexpected.

"Johanna!"

"Have I startled you?" she said, trying to smile. "But we agreed to meet here."

"Of course," he answered hurriedly. "I have been expecting you for half an hour; only I did not hear you come. Well?"

"I have been with Frans," she said.

The abruptness of his question did not displease her; indeed, she had a momentary satisfaction in the impression that he, too, was anxious.

"Well? Tell me quickly, Johanna. Of course he has told you that you are your own mistress?"

"One's own mistress! Who is?" She spoke dreamily, without looking at him.

"You are, if ever any one were!"

"Then I wish it were not so. I wish it were not I

who had to decide against myself!" she cried, with a rapid and passionate change of voice.

There was a momentary pause.

"Do you mean to ask me to wait longer?" he asked sternly.

It was what she had been about to ask, but she changed her words in that moment.

"No, oh no!" she exclaimed, shrinking.

"Then what?"

"I cannot be spared for a year. Arent, we must part."

He stood and looked gloomily at her, kicking a pebble with his foot. Her resolution piqued the vanity of which he had rather more than his share.

"How easily you say that!" he said. "Does it really cost you nothing?"

She was silent. There are times when words seem absolutely expressionless.

"I have seen it ever since we met," he went recklessly on; "in all you have said to me you have been cold and half-hearted. If ever you had cared for me you would have been more anxious to consult my interests than your brother's. Yes, you are right; if you are so indifferent, we had better part."

She stood, pale and motionless, staring at him. Suddenly she put out her hands.

"Hush, hush!" she said—"I can't bear it!"

He looked at her, walked away, came back.

"Can't you understand," he began impatiently, "it rests with you, and with you only? Your brother has a daughter; he does not really want you. You can certainly marry me if—you love me."

She shook her head.

"If you doubt my love," she said sadly, "it is indeed time to part."

Obstinate lines stiffened his mouth.

"If I doubt," he said, taking up her words, "it is easy enough for you to prove that my doubt is unfounded."

"I cannot," said Johanna simply.

She meant that she could no more prove her love than prove that she stood there in person. One fact was as evident to her as the other. He did not read the deeper meaning in her refusal, and he was irritated that she declined the test.

"Then, you mean everything to come to an end?"

"An end?" she repeated dully. "We cannot marry, but—Arent, we shall always be friends?"

"Certainly."

He spoke coldly; apparently it cost him nothing to make the promise which she would gladly have heard him reject with scorn.

Just then Hilvardine came towards them from the house. A sudden, darting jealousy made Johanna look at her with a searching glance. There could be no doubt about her beauty. She wore a thin black dress, of some material which fell in soft folds, and as it was one of her fancies never to be without a flower, a glowing crimson rose was fastened into the front and gave exactly the needed point of brilliancy. When she reached them she looked at both with a smile.

"Can you come and speak to Professor Mathius, Aunt Johanna?" she asked.

Johanna hesitated. At that moment it did not seem possible to talk to Professor Mathius, and she wished he had not so quickly responded to her request. But all her life she had been accustomed to set herself on one side, and it was probable he had come at inconvenience to himself. Still she hesitated and looked at Arent. Did he not wish her to stay? A sign from him would have

decided her, but it did not come in answer to her wistful looks. She was obliged to put out her hand.

"Good-bye, Arent."

"Good-bye. Make my apologies to Heer Steen."

"We shall see you again?"

"Yes. I shall be coming over, I suppose."

She walked slowly and heavily away. There could hardly have been a greater contrast to the buoyant young figure which had but just come along the same path. Perhaps Captain Wrangel remarked this; at any rate, the hard lines about his mouth did not relax while he watched her. Hilvardine noticed them as she looked at him, still smiling.

"What am I to do?" she inquired presently. "It seems inhospitable to leave you here alone, and yet——"

He turned with a start.

"I beg your pardon," he said hurriedly. "I must go."

"Do you mean that you are going away?"

"Exactly. I've had my dismissal."

The words were loaded with bitterness. Evidently he could not forgive Johanna's decision.

"Your dismissal! Oh, no! How could she? Do you mean that she does not——"

"Does not care for me? That's what she leaves me to imagine."

"But it is impossible. You must be mistaken," exclaimed Hilvardine, turning her beautiful eyes upon him with an expression of wonder. "I am sure you must be mistaken. Perhaps you didn't understand what she said."

"Oh, she made it clear," he said angrily.

But in spite of his anger, the lines about his mouth softened slightly as he looked at the young girl.

"What reason did she give?"

"You were the reason."

"I!"

"You and your brothers and sisters."

"That is really absurd! Do you believe us to be unmanageable?" said Hilvardine, smiling at him.

"I think it manifestly absurd. You would not hesitate, would you, to undertake the charge of your father's house?"

"I think it ought to be mine," she said, kindling.

She stood straight before him, her eyes flashing, and her beauty seemed to him more evident than ever.

"I am sure of it," he said emphatically, "but your aunt is quite unreasonable on the subject. I have said nothing all this time; there is a limit to endurance, however, and my own feeling is, that in matters of this sort a man must be first or—nowhere. You see I am nowhere."

"I am so very sorry," she said, speaking in a kind of childish pitiful way, which he thought charming. It was the only sympathy he could have endured, and instead of leaving at once, as he had proposed, he lingered, talking to Hilvardine, and walking up and down under the trees, sometimes in sight of Johanna, as she sat in the upstairs room with Professor Mathius, sometimes hidden by the spreading trees, but always really present to her eyes and lying with a heavy weight upon her heart.

CHAPTER VII.

"He that is thy friend indeed,
He will help thee in thy need."

"Truth is unwelcome, however divine."

JOHANNA found it a hard task to collect her thoughts for the interview with Professor Mathius. She did her best, trying to forget her own pre-occupying cares and to

bring back to her mind the points on which she wanted advice; but there were sufficient signs of disturbance on her face as she went into the room for him to be aware that something was wrong. He avoided a second glance, turning his attention to a group of silver miniature toys which lay on a little tray on the table. There was a kettle and a tea-service, to say nothing of a tiny model of a *wafelen* gridiron. Mathius took them up, one by one. He did not seem to be attending much to Johanna, yet when he spoke there was an eager kindness in his voice which touched her deeply.

"You wanted to speak to me, Freule. If there is anything I can do for you, you will be giving me a real pleasure. What is it?"

"Ah, that is what you must tell me," said Johanna, trying to smile. "Perhaps you will think me very troublesome and fanciful, but I am in a difficulty."

"Let me hear."

"It is about——" She hesitated, and changed her words. "Can you tell me anything as to young Van Regensdorf?"

"He is one of our students, certainly; and he attends my lectures," said the professor, after a pause. "Personally, I have had very slight communication with him."

"But you know something by report?"

"Well—yes."

"And what is it?" asked Johanna quickly.

"Nothing good."

She looked at him and once more hesitated.

"You know, perhaps, in the same way, something of an attachment between him and Hilvardine?"

"I have heard something."

"Enough to form an opinion."

"As to the undesirability of the attachment? Yes,

without doubt, I have formed that strongly," said Mathius gravely.

It was at this moment that Captain Wrangel and Hilvardine came fully within sight of the window; Johanna saw them, and the professor noticed a spasm of pain cross her face. He bent with yet closer attention over his minute playthings.

"What shall I do!" she exclaimed under her breath.

"Don't distress yourself," he said kindly, as if her words related to nothing but the matter on hand. "If there is real love at the bottom of it all, I have a great belief in its power to work good. You may see him transformed. If not—— But what do you say? Is Hilvardine's heart in the matter?"

"I cannot tell. Her heart is a mystery," said Johanna bitterly.

"If not, and if it is as I suspect—with young Van Regensdorf, at all events—the element of opposition in this affair piques and amuses them both. He would not really think of marrying a girl without a fortune."

"If she could understand that her pride might be touched."

"*If*. It is a point women are slow to understand," said Mathius, smiling.

"Oh, many lessons are forced upon them in their lives," Johanna answered, in a voice which trembled; and as she spoke two tears gathered and fell over upon her cheeks.

There was a little click.

"I have broken the hinge!" he cried in dismay; "I am the clumsiest ass in the world! However, if you will so far forgive me as to find a morsel of paper in which to wrap it, you shall not know it has been broken when I bring it to-morrow."

The little search gave Johanna time to recover herself, and when she took the tiny toy from her companion her face was quite calm.

"You have not told me what to do."

"Can you make her understand his real character?"

"No, no," she declared, shaking her head; "that is hopeless. She would only imagine that I was prejudiced—perhaps jealous. I have failed with Hilvardine; she does not like me, and she resents the smallest interference."

"Oh," he said, smiling indulgently, "she is but a child—a beautiful child."

"Perhaps," said Johanna, a little sharply. "At any rate, if any one tells her it had better be you."

"My dear Freule, I tell her! She would send me about my business."

"She would not think you jealous, and she knows you cared for her mother."

"I shall share the fate of all meddlers," he said, lifting his eyebrows.

"She does not know that people are talking about her, that she is being compromised. She is very ignorant and very imprudent. Perhaps you can open her eyes," said Johanna, with an effort.

He reflected.

"I do not know, but I will try."

"Thank you."

He got up at once. Something in Johanna's weary voice told him that she had come to the end of her strength.

"Good-bye. If I have any success you shall hear."

"Good-bye," she said. "You have been very kind. I don't know that one ever succeeds in shifting one's

own burden upon other people's backs; but that is what I have been trying to do."

He felt very sorry for her as he went out into the summer sunshine. All the clean white houses shone, painfully dazzling, in the intense light; the scrubbed roof-tiles shone, the bell knobs glittered like intense sparks, but there was also a pleasant shade of trees to temper the glare, and an infinity of green shutters and striped blinds. The young professor walked along, his head bent, his hands behind him, and his thoughts fluctuating between the subject of a lecture on the Exarchs which he had to give the next day, and Johanna's troubles. That she had not taken him into the heart of them was evident, but he reflected with a smile that she had placed him in a very fatherly position towards Hilvardine. "Do I look so old?" he said to himself, and his smile was succeeded by a momentary annoyance. "It must be from living so much among those old fellows in the past. The Exarch Isaac doesn't seem so different from the rest of us, after all."

Passing into the avenues which run round a great part of the town, his ear caught the sound of wheels, and, looking up, he saw two or three four-in-hands, driven by the students on the way to some picnic. Willem van Regendorf was driving the second. Hats were taken off. The professor, lifting his, stood for a moment looking after them; somehow the sight made him feel older than the companionship of the Exarch Isaac. At length he turned away, and found himself face to face with Madame Marken, an old acquaintance who, like himself, had recently returned to the town. She was a tall woman, with a forehead from which the hair was tightly strained back, a sallow complexion, shrewd eyes, and a thin mouth.

She spoke in an undertone, which did not prevent her words from being keenly incisive.

"Take care, mijnheer," she said, with a low laugh. "One should not be too proud, even of one's pupils."

"You are very good to bestow such a necessary warning," he answered, with his eyes twinkling.

"Warnings are a cheap way of earning gratitude, and, moreover, they are always so effectual. By the way, you might deliver one yourself."

"For you, or on my own responsibility?"

"Oh, on general philanthropic grounds—with a dash of the University to make it personal. Tell your friend, Heer Steen, that he should put a stop to his daughter's flirtations with that good-for-nothing young Van Regensdorf, unless he wants to have her talked about."

Mathius started. Then he said coldly—

"People are very ready to talk."

"Very," said Madame Marken, nodding to an acquaintance.

"Without mercy for a motherless girl."

"Ah, I see," she said, nodding at him this time. "*Les beaux yeux!* But, my excellent professor of history, don't your studies really teach you anything about human nature? Wise men that you are, you give yourselves up to minute researches into the past, you tabulate facts, you dissect insects, you arrange plants, and you are absolute babies in what concerns men and women, and the hearts you have to do with all day long! I have no patience with you. The Jesuits have fifty times your sense."

During this tirade the professor recovered his temper. He laughed.

"Your moral?"

"Look at your causes and you will understand the working of effects. Don't you see that it is just because

Hilvardine Steen is motherless and foolish that we all keep a look-out on her? We feel as if we were partly responsible for her bringing up. No girl in the town will be so closely watched. It is a proof of benevolence."

"You might well accuse me of ignorance! Do you know that until now I never understood the definition of benevolence?"

"Don't sneer; you don't do it well. Leave that to women; and see if you can't devise something more useful to your friends. Go and talk to Heer Steen. Poor foolish Frans! anybody who knew how might twist him round their fingers in five minutes—but then it is true that how to deal with your fellow-creatures doesn't form a part of the University course. However, try!"

Not unnaturally this interview left Mathius a good deal irritated.

"Good Heavens!" he reflected, "what have I done that I should be picked out from a hundred others, and pricked and goaded into what is no business of mine? It's worse than Leyden, far worse; for there I was not troubled with young ladies. This wretched child is putting the whole town into a ferment, and much she will thank me for letting her know that her lover is a worthless young scoundrel. I've some compunction in doing it, too, for if he should be worth anything, her sticking to him might pull him up. Those eyes of hers—*Pouf*, don't be a fool, Arnold! One thing is very certain, if the thing has to be done, the sooner I get through it the better—though where the opportunity's to come from I can't for the life of me conceive. I can't go to the house and request an interview."

Chance, however, or coincidence, came to his aid. That very evening, after dinner, he was paying a visit at the house of a newly married couple, when Hilvardine

and two ladies—a mother and daughter—were announced. The mother, Madame van Hoopt, sat and talked with Mathius. Presently she said in a low voice—

“You are an old friend of the Steens; can you do nothing about this foolish affair with young Van Regensdorp? Hilvardine is behaving very imprudently; she allows him to walk with her, and they correspond. Yes, indeed, I am not speaking without knowing what I say. Adrienne is very fond of Hilvardine; and for her mother’s sake we are all sorry. I do not quite like to speak myself to Johanna Steen.”

There began to be something ludicrous in this storm of appeals. The professor, vexed as he was, could have laughed.

“What can I do?” he demanded.

“You can tell them what he is like.”

“That they all know, except the young lady herself.”

“Then tell her.”

“How?”

“Anyhow,” said Madame van Hoopt, smiling. “Do you really want an opportunity?”

“I don’t know. It would be something towards it.”

“I can manage it without difficulty if you will take your leave when we do. My daughter shall walk with me, and you two can follow.”

To say the truth, this last attack had a direct effect upon Mathius. It proved that Madame Marken had not been exaggerating when she spoke of the opinion of the town. Madame van Hoopt belonged to one of the leading families, and was a kindly natured woman. In remarking that Adrienne was fond of Hilvardine, he fancied, rightly or wrongly, that he read a warning that the intercourse might be stopped if the girl persisted in her defiant conduct. Such a hint carried a grave meaning.

They left the house, and Madame van Hoopt was as good as her word. She skilfully drew on her daughter, and the others followed a few steps behind. The road led through the public gardens under the flowering trees, and by the side of a clear canal where swans were pluming themselves. It was so short a distance which they had to walk that there was no time for gradual approaches and leading up to his subject, even if Mathius had possessed the art, which, however, did not belong to him. Nevertheless, in the few moments of silence before he spoke, Hilvardine was conscious of that uneasy impression which we have all experienced when look or thought are intently fastened upon us. She quickened her steps and would have joined the others, but that he checked her.

"Don't hurry; there is something I have to say."

"To me?"

He paused, and said slowly, "Yes, to you—and because I knew your mother well." Then he went on abruptly, "I want to speak about young Van Regensdorf."

"What of him?" There was a curious restraint in her voice.

"Of him, for himself, very little; but if it is you and he we have to talk about, then there is a good deal to be said."

"Who has spoken about us?"

"It seems to me that the whole town is speaking."

"So you descend to listen to gossip?"

"Oh, yes," said Mathius, immovably. "As one grows older one finds out that gossip is the voice of the world, and that a good deal of nonsense is talked about its cruelty. As often as not it's the truth. What has gossip said that is false in this matter?"

"I don't know," said Hilvardine sullenly.

"That you meet and walk with him?"

She was silent.

"And correspond. Is that a lie?"

She did not reply at once. At last the words rushed out "How can they know?"

He looked at her. "Do you really wish to be told?"

"Yes."

"It is said he boasts of the fact."

Hilvardine turned white; this shaft had gone home. He felt very sorry for her, the more so that her immediate impulse was to defend Van Regensdorf.

"I do not believe it," she said passionately. "And you can repeat that to me, and then say that gossip is not cruel! It *is* cruel—hateful!—and you are as prejudiced as the others!"

"But if the thing is true?" said Mathius, looking straight before him, and a good deal touched. "Can you trust him so entirely that your heart tells you it is false without a moment's questioning? Is he a good man—one with whom your future life will be what a happy wife's should be? What have you got to go upon as yet? His character at the University stands low; he is extravagant, wild, idle—he even runs a chance of being expelled. Do these things look like happiness? You may say vaguely that you don't believe it all, and call us prejudiced; but you know as well as I do that is childish. After all, mercifully, you *are* a child, or you would be more sharply judged."

"You have no right to say this," said the girl, struggling to hold her own. "You——"

"Never mind me. You may think what you like of me."

"—And Aunt Johanna——"

"Never mind her either. Or, no," he went on, turn-

ing upon her with a smile, "I won't say that. It would be just as well if you would mind her more. But the present matter for you to consider is not so much whether you are willing to pain those who care for you, as whether you object to being talked about in a tone which would have given your mother intense grief, and to putting yourself in the power of a man who can't be trusted."

He judged it best to make his words strong. He knew Hilvardine well enough to feel sure that he must strike hard if he were to make any impression, although it smote him when he saw that her eyes were full of mortified tears. He liked her the better for making a stand. She said scornfully, though with a tremulous quiver in her voice—

"I hope your friends will not desert you without better evidence, Heer Mathius!"

This charitable exclamation of hers he did not answer. Having said his say, he walked silently on, feeling more attracted to her than he had ever thought possible, and watching her downcast face. The evening was breezy and full of tender lights; thin and vapourish clouds swept lightly and hastily across the sky, scarcely veiling the blue, except here and there where they had been as it were tossed into one another, and threatened to fall in rain. Presently Madame van Hoopt, hearing that the voices behind her had ceased, stood still and waited for them. It was on Hilvardine's lips to say one quick word to the professor which should show that though she might be wilful she was not ungrateful. It was one of those impulses which we resist and remember regretfully all our lifetime. Hilvardine afterwards would have given worlds to have done this, but at the moment pride sealed her lips, and when they joined the others

he immediately took the opportunity of wishing them good evening. She talked and laughed so gaily the remainder of the way that Madame van Hoopt decided that Mathius had been over merciful, and made certain sage reflections as to the effect of pretty faces on the wisest of men.

But when Hilvardine walked up the stairs of her home the gaiety had died out of her face. It was strangely fixed, and there was pain in every line. It was not that Mathius had told her anything she did not know before, for the things had been said to her by older women, and she had only felt a certain amused defiance. Half of them were in all probability jealous, and it was real delight to her to shock them and walk perilously near the edge, yet have it in her power to pull up when she pleased. For she never doubted that she could pull up when she pleased. Her certainty on this point might have opened her eyes if she had not wilfully held them shut, for it proved that she was not really in love with young Van Regensdorf, or she could not so calmly have regarded the possibility of detaching herself from him whenever the necessity arose. It also proved something else—that she did not know him. In love she was not. He had appealed to her vanity, to girlish romantic thrills; he had flattered her, and taught her to consider herself a sort of guardian angel, but had never reached the best and noblest part of her; never, even, had gone so far down towards those sacred springs as Mathius that day.

There was really no strong dominant feeling to which she could appeal from the sting of the professor's words. He treated her as a child, implying that had she not been one she could not have acted as she had done. No scourge of reproach could have left such a smart be-

hind. All her theories of defying authority, of resenting interference, and of exemplifying her strong powers of faithfulness to an ideal, were suddenly shrivelled into nothing. She tried hard to recover her dignity, to call back some of the glory with which she had surrounded her attitude; but it was in vain—the gilding was gone. The passionate longing which welled up in her heart was to put herself right in the eyes of Mathius. The shame which burnt in her cheeks came from the knowledge that only yesterday again had she written to Willem. Could it be—was such a humiliation possible as that he should talk of these letters, boast of them! It was significant of her real opinion of the two men that she did not feel as if his denial of the fact would satisfy her, and that the mere hint of it from Mathius carried such force. She tossed the haunting thought from her; it came back again and again, like a ball tied to a string. She would tax Willem with his treachery—she would be able in a moment to see whether he were guilty, and if he were, she would break with him for ever. It would be a dreadful satisfaction to Johanna, but would prove to others that things were not as they supposed. Hilvardine lifted her head and looked round with a light in her eyes. She would be glad to set herself straight with the professor, but, oddly enough, an added anger against Johanna rose in her heart. She did not doubt that it was she who had stirred Mathius into speaking—set him against her was the expression her thoughts used,—and she felt a naughty burning desire that Johanna might also suffer in her love; there was no wish in her heart to spare her. For her excuse be it said that as yet she did not know what love was; her own pangs were from vanity and wounded pride, and did not seem unendurable. But when she thought of

Mathius there was confusion in her mind; she was annoyed with him for speaking, yet would not for worlds that he had held his peace; and he, liking her for her faithfulness, but imagining that his warning had been all in vain, would have been mightily surprised could he have known with what intensity she was trying to reconcile pride with this new germ of discontent, so that she might yield, and yet not show that she had yielded, and yet let him feel that she had yielded to him.

CHAPTER VIII.

“For what the lips have lightly said
The heart will lightly hold,
And things on which we daily tread
Are lightly bought and sold.”

WITH the strain of a family like that of her brother's upon her, Johanna could not indulge in the luxury of sad thoughts in solitude; she was wanted for twenty things, and went through them patiently and mechanically. In spite of her better reason, her heart refused to accept its doom as final; every ring at the bell, every step, made her start and flush with a thrill of hope that Arent had come back again. But the night had no such delusive hopes with which to mock her, and was terrible. She only slept towards morning, and came down to breakfast pale and heavy-eyed. Hilvardine, on the contrary, looked as brilliant as ever, and was in a mood which enchanted the children. Even her father once or twice glanced up with a smile.

“Johanna,” he said at last, helping himself to a flake of cheese, “I must go this afternoon to Zeist, will you go with me?”

She hesitated for a moment on Hilvardine's account; it surprised her when the girl announced she would come, too, and made a proposal to take Luce, who it appeared at some past period of antiquity had been promised a visit to Zeist, and had lost faith in man owing to the promise not having been redeemed. Hendrik had a cold, but Johanna was glad to give Constans a pleasure, and soon after the early dinner the little party set forth.

Zeist is a curiously peaceful and old-world village, where is a large settlement of Moravian brothers. It is reached by one of those pretty level roads which, with their bordering of fine trees, have all the effect of an avenue. There is a tramway which takes its passengers briskly along, and stops at little hamlets of inconceivable neatness, with white, green-shuttered houses. The trees are magnificent; numbers of copper beeches give a variety to the foliage. Country houses lie close to the road, for the Dutch are a sociable people, and though many of these houses have grounds stretching far behind, it is evident they do not dislike the close neighbourhood of the white road, or the little stream of cheerful human life, and are not in sympathy with the English habit of burying themselves in solitude. Tiny canals edge the road, and in front of the houses there are plats of coarse grass, and masses of the most brilliant flowers often made to border the canal and run along the road like a gorgeous ribbon.

There is a peculiar brightness of colouring in the Dutch landscape; the tints are decided—sharp whites, greens, reds, blacks. Far away the little red villages nestle under their trees, while the foreground of broad sunny meadows is dotted with black and white cows, and divided by small canals, along which you will see

men pushing their flat-bottomed boats. The farms have odd-looking thatched roofs attached to them, supported at each corner by a great post. This is for the ricks. Sometimes in the distance a chocolate-coloured sail appears to be moving along the dry land, and now and then from one of the nearer bulrush-bordered, frog-haunted canals, a great stork rises slowly and sails majestically away above the pastures.

The Moravian brothers have settled themselves under the trees at Zeist. The Broederhuis forms two sides of a large quadrangle, which is divided by the road, and the first thing which strikes a visitor as he passes the central group of lilac rhododendrons, is the extraordinary quiet and outward sleepiness of the place. The trees rustle, the birds chirp, a figure flits by—have you suddenly fallen out of the nineteenth century with its rush and its hurry? And yet, within, a little industrious world is at work, all trades find themselves at home, and you may watch the hive pursuing its different avocations of bookbinding, shoemaking, dressmaking, lacquering. Though, somehow or other, you don't see them, the townspeople come out to buy, for not only are these things to be found, but here is a stock from the other Moravian centres of industry—toys from Germany, glass from Austria. Luce had set her heart upon a toy family of rabbits, but when she had made her purchases she grew tired; Johanna wanted to speak about a dress, and as Constans' only wickedness was an incipient and quite unexpected love of finery, she went with her aunt. As for the town councillor, he had left them on their arrival, having business which would occupy him for an hour. Johanna suggested that Luce should sit in the toy-room and rest; but Hilvardine shrugged her shoulders and said she would take her into the open air; it was too

hot and stuffy indoors, and they would find a bench and sit down. It must be confessed that Johanna's thoughts took an immediate flight to the possibility that students from Utrecht might be disporting themselves at Zeist, but it was the last thing likely—a Moravian settlement offering few allurements, at least to young men of the Van Regensdorf type. Nevertheless, when the girl and the child had passed out of the court, and by a little stagnant canal covered with green slime which a man in a flat-bottomed punt was raking up, a young man who had been sitting under the trees in the garden of a sort of coffee-house, drinking *advocatenborrel*, detached himself from a group of companions who greeted his departure with laughter, and followed them.

Hilvardine crossed the principal road, by which they had come from the town, and went straight on. The road she had chosen led to some delightful woods, but she had no intention of walking so far. A little further on there was a bench or two, on one of which Luce might repose her sturdy little legs, and a breeze from the shady trees behind might reach them. This time, at any rate, she was quite innocent of any expectation of meeting Van Regensdorf. Yet he was filling her thoughts with so much insistence, that when he overtook her as they reached the bench, she neither felt nor expressed surprise. He noticed only that she looked at him very searchingly as she gave him her hand, and he fixed his own eyes boldly on her in return, for a keen animation made her look unusually beautiful.

"What chance has brought you to this sleepy hole?" he demanded. "When I saw you go into the Broederhuis I couldn't believe my luck."

"Yes; it is lucky," she said directly, "for I wanted to speak to you."

He was quick enough to detect something at once, were it only in the questioning look with which she regarded him. He read in it a new impression on Hilvardine's part. But he chose to ignore it.

"You wanted to see me. That's good hearing, my Hilvardine. You are often so cruel to a poor fellow who does his best to please you that when we meet you will hardly fling me a word."

He said this in an aggrieved voice; but perhaps her awakened perception allowed her to read a light mockery beneath the words. She turned away her eyes and began nervously to tie and untie a bow on her parasol.

"I have told you that things cannot go on like this," she said, looking down.

"Ah, those are the words which I don't care to have flung at me."

"You must listen, though," she said, desperately.

"Can't we take it for granted that they have been all said?" he asked, heaving a mock sigh. "I know so well the string of remonstrances which your aunt and the other old cats of the place furnish you with: 'Young Van Regensdorf, *so* idle and extravagant—oh, *shocking!* A young girl like Hilvardine Steen to venture to choose for herself; audacious enough to love a good-for-nothing young fellow of whom we *all* disapprove!' Oh, if you don't hear as many of their sermons as you wish for, I can preach them to you by the yard." He tossed back his head with a laugh. He was very handsome.

Hilvardine made a movement of impatience.

"You know very well I care nothing for what they say. It is that I do not wish it myself. I will have no more writing."

He looked at her very attentively.

"Who told you to say this?"

She coloured angrily. "I tell you it is my own wish."

"Oh, I know you better, Hilvardine. Such a wish never grew up in your mind unplanted. So somebody objected to the writing? It's their own fault. If they did not heap obstacles in the way there would be no need for concealment."

"Concealment!" Hilvardine repeated the words with scorn. "I have concealed nothing. They all know what there is to know."

"All the town?" he said, with a laugh.

She was looking at him again when he asked the careless question, and a red flush mounted slowly into her face and burned there painfully. She did not lower her eyes, but the humiliation which Mathius had tried to excite at that moment got the mastery. He—Willem—even he, then, was of opinion there was that in her conduct which she would not like to own! And she could not wither him up for such a thought; she could not trust her voice even to show her indignation. She was afraid that she might burst into tears.

"All the town, if they please," she said unsteadily.

He laughed again. "You are so curiously audacious, do you know? I believe there lies half your charm! Of course, I am proud of having gained you, but you might find it inconvenient to have tongues wagging more than they do. Never mind, Hilvardine, we will keep our walks and letters to ourselves."

There was encouragement in his voice. He little thought what an irreparable mistake he made. Hilvardine was a person who would be unaffected by the opinion of any one but herself and one or two others. Until now, when a new motive was at work, it had seemed a matter of most profound indifference that she

should shock Johanna, or Madame Marken, or any others of her acquaintance. She rather enjoyed it. So, to find that what she did, even Willem, for whom she did it, treated as something she would naturally try to hide, was a horrible humiliation to her proud spirit. She answered nothing, however, and he thought he had swept away her scruples.

"Now," he said, sitting down by her and lightly touching her hand, "tell me how you came here, and why did you come? While you are about it, by the way, you may as well tell me why I came? Did you bring me merely by willing it? I give you my word, I can't tell what induced me to walk out with the other fellows."

Hilvardine sprang up. "You don't understand," she said sharply. "I am quite serious in what I say."

"Of course—so am I," he said, laughing.

She stamped her foot impatiently. "You are not. You think this is only a whim, and that I shall have changed again to-morrow."

"Your very whims are charming."

"Very well. Charming or not, I don't mean to meet you again."

Something in her persistence irritated him at last. He frowned, and his voice grew hard.

"No? We shall see!" he said significantly.

"I don't suppose you would force yourself upon me!" she said, staring haughtily.

"I shall hold my own."

"Your own?"

"Haven't you promised eternal constancy, and all that sort of thing? I think I could point it out to any curious person in your letters."

She turned pale, and he saw it, and softened his voice.

"Come, Hilvardine, all this is not what your heart tells you to say. Some meddling fool has put it into your mouth. Those pretty lips of yours were meant for much more charming uses."

How blind she had been! Good Heavens, how blind!

He went on, unheeding the effect of his words, "Cornelius Brandt informed me the other day that you were the loveliest girl in the town, and said it as if he had made a discovery. The idiot! I found it out a good while ago."

She clenched her hand involuntarily, and said in a strained voice, "If you have anything more serious to say, say it. This will be your last opportunity."

"We know better, Luce—don't we?"

"Oblige me by keeping Luce out of the conversation."

He heaved a mock sigh.

"Dear Hilvardine, there *is* something very serious."

"What?"

"If you model yourself so completely on the lines of the beloved aunt, you will end—by growing like her."

"I wish I could!" she cried bitterly. "I wish I could! I should be a better girl."

"Ah, but you can't—luckily!"

"Willem!"

"That's better."

"Don't you see I am in earnest?"

"So am I. I don't mean to be thrown over. To-morrow I shall look for you in the Mal."

"Look, then!" she exclaimed angrily. "You know my determination."

He was growing irritated again.

"You had better speak out and tell the truth," he said roughly; "there's some one else in the wind."

"No; oh no, no!" she said, shrinking.

"There is! But I tell you that sooner than give you up to another I'd kill the fellow!"

"There is no one!" she cried.

There was no one; yet why at that moment did she seem to see one figure lying face upwards, and shudder?

Van Regensdorf looked gloomily and distrustfully at her.

"I shall find him out," he said. "It might interest him to see a few of your letters."

They were walking back towards the high-road. As he said these words she turned sharply upon him—

"You are a coward!" she exclaimed.

But she quailed, and he saw it. He repeated sullenly—

"I am not going to give you up to another man."

Neither of them spoke immediately after this. They walked rapidly; but when they had nearly reached the point where the road from the town cut the other at right angles they simultaneously stood still.

"Well?" said the girl, looking directly at him as if she expected an answer.

"Well?"

He lifted his eyebrows. At this she half turned away with a sharp movement of impatience.

"Oh, you understand me well enough."

"Not I. Your hints are too abstruse."

"How can I make them clearer? It seems to me I have spoken out."

"You've repeated your lesson. I give you credit for that."

She began an angry exclamation, but checked herself. "Well, it doesn't matter. I can act, at any rate. Then, perhaps, you will understand. Good-bye!"

"We can both act," he said, not offering to take her hand.

Her eyes flashed.

"Do you wish me not to think of you as a gentleman?"

"Think of me as you like," he said, with a laugh, "so long as you remember that I have your promise, and that if it is not kept the world shall judge between us."

"I believe——" she was beginning impetuously, when a sound fell on her ear which stopped her.

"A runaway horse," said Van Regensdorf carelessly. "You were observing——"

But Hilvardine darted forward. "Where is Luce?" she cried.

Luce, indeed, had grown tired of this talk, of which she found it impossible to understand anything, and had started on a voyage of discovery on her own account, staring at two or three other little girls who were on their way home from school, carrying tidy green *trommeltjes* which had contained their dinner. No one had missed her, and she followed in the wake of these children, turned a corner, and was effectually out of sight. She strayed on slowly, and the others got ahead. A tram came by, drawn by a fast-trotting strong grey horse. She found a delightful amusement in watching this go by; then she stared through the iron gate of a garden at the flowers, which was not so entertaining. This done with, she began to feel injured at her own solitude, and to meditate a return to the place where she had left her sister; but she carried out her purpose slowly, and with many profound investigations of such great matters as grass and stones and terrified insects. Then she heard an advancing clatter of hoofs, and, looking up with much interest, was aware of a riderless horse rushing along the flat road behind; and, terror-struck, set off as fast

as her short fat legs could carry her, to seek her sister's protection. Why, for this purpose, she should have chosen the very centre of the road, instead of the edge, where she would have been comparatively safe, is known only to herself.

This, however, was what she did; and when Hilvardine rushed round the corner what she beheld was Luce advancing with bitter cries, and the horse close behind. At the same moment, as it happened, the town councillor, with Johanna and Constans, were coming up the road from the Broederhuis, but they had not advanced sufficiently to see Luce's peril. Hilvardine flew towards her little sister without a thought of her own danger, but with the sickening sensation that it was impossible to reach her. She hardly knew what followed; it seemed to her that Van Regensdorf passed her like a flash, that Luce was violently flung forward almost at her feet, and that Van Regensdorf lay motionless in the road. She had one dreadful moment of relief, horror, and bewilderment before the others were on the spot, and people came running from the village, Willem's fellow-students among them. Johanna was the first to lift Luce from the ground, and the frightened child hid her face in her arms and burst into a loud cry.

"She is sure to have been badly hurt somewhere," said her father despairingly.

"She would not cry so loudly if she were much hurt," said Johanna, in a reassuring voice. "Frans, do go and help those boys!"

But, with the best intentions in the world, Heer Steen's help was of the kind which increases confusion, and it was a relief to every one when strong hasty footsteps were heard, and Professor Mathius walked into the centre of the little group.

"An accident?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he knelt down by the side of the young man and gave his directions in decided tones. "Give him air for the first thing; and you, Van Hoopt, go and rout out the doctor; he lives in the seventh house on the left." He was feeling his patient all over as he spoke, and soon ascertained that his arm was broken, probably by a kick from the horse. He was also stunned, but already showed signs of coming to himself. Mathius glanced up from his kneeling position, took in the group and Hilvardine's terror-struck face. Then he began to talk cheerfully, as the best means of interesting his audience, and turning their attention from her. "If the doctor is not at home we shall still do very well; we will get a splint somehow—Arnheim, see if you can cut a few short stout sticks—strap up his arm, and bundle him off to the town. Mijnheer, do you happen to have a knife about you? or, better still, you, Freule, a pair of scissors?"

Yes, Johanna had a sharp pair of scissors, with which he and another of the students cut up the sleeve.

"Nothing worse than a simple fracture," he said exultantly. "Freule Johanna, you will have to collect handkerchiefs for bandages. I begin to hope the doctor will not arrive to deprive us of our laurels."

He had succeeded in restoring confidence among the small party, even little Luce had ceased her sobs, and with her head lying restfully against Johanna's shoulder, and two large tears stationary on her rough red cheeks, had decided that the position of affairs was interesting, and in their consideration was forgetting her griefs. Hilvardine had not so quickly recovered; she was pale and trembling, but held herself in hand, as Mathius discovered when he looked at her guardedly. How came

it all about? He was curious. Young Van Hoopt ran up at this moment—the doctor was out.

“It matters little,” said the professor; “we can make a good job without him. One of you other fellows go and order out a carriage—easy and roomy, mind you. Now for the handkerchiefs, a waistcoat, and the sticks, and a little amateur surgery.”

Johanna gave Luce to her sister and knelt down to help him. Mathius did his work deftly and well, transferring his few remarks to his patient, who was now fully conscious. Frans Steen stood helplessly by; being quite useless, he showed an inclination to ask inconvenient questions, which Mathius checked. Johanna made but one remark; it was to enquire whether Van Regensdorf might not be taken to the Broederhuis, where he would have the best of nursing; but Mathius negatived the proposal, declaring that with the arm securely fixed, the drive along the smooth road would do no harm. He was, indeed, so confident and cheery that no one thought of opposing him, and he contrived to leave no margin for remarks. The two women were both grateful for his tact.

The carriage arrived, and the professor's directions were efficiently carried out. So far all had gone well, and he had almost succeeded in giving such a natural air to the accident that Hilvardine's presence might pass unnoticed, when an incident occurred which disturbed his precautions. As Van Regensdorf was being helped into the carriage he found himself close to Hilvardine, who seemed to have no power to move. What her look meant when it met his thus directly it was difficult to understand, whether it were regret, or wounded pride, or alarm. But Van Regensdorf answered it by words which most of them heard clearly—

"It is nothing, Hilvardine; and I am glad it has happened, since it was for you."

She shrank as if she had been struck. Mathius frowned angrily, helped him into the carriage, jumped after him, slammed the door, and drove away.

CHAPTER IX.

"Here strong resolve—how broken,
Rash hope, and foolish fear."

THE professor might have played the part of a guardian angel up to this point; but when Van Regensdorf had settled himself as easily as he could in the corner, and looked up to make a remark, he beheld him scowling like a thunder-cloud, and dropped the intention. They drove on for something like a mile in silence, Mathius putting a strong restraint on himself. At last he said, in a voice that was dangerously quiet—

"May I ask you to have the goodness to inform me what is the meaning of all this?"

"A runaway horse, mijnheer; or so I imagined," said the younger man, with a laugh.

"I am talking of what you were about before?"

Van Regensdorf was instantly nettled.

"I was walking with Mademoiselle Steen," he said boldly.

"And so, sir," growled Mathius, in a voice which, though low-pitched, was full of wrath, "you are unmanly enough to take advantage of the ignorance and innocence of a young self-willed and motherless girl, to persuade her to fall into a line of conduct which, you know, if she does not, is certain to expose her to disrespectful re-

marks from the young men of your own set, and to lower her position among those whose opinion is, Heaven knows, infinitely more valuable!"

Van Regensdorf looked up fiercely.

"You take advantage of my condition, mijnheer!"

"Do I? I should be talking in a very different fashion if that arm of yours were not tied up to your side."

"If it weren't, you and Hilvardine, too, would have other things to make a row about," muttered the other under his breath.

To do him justice he had never hesitated in his attempt to save the child's life; but he was the first to be conscious that his *rôle* had been that of a hero, and he expected recognition of it. Mathius caught the words and stared at him.

"Good Heavens!" he repeated, in a low voice. "I believe he means to boast of his deeds!"

It roused his wonder, as did anything mean, cowardly, or degrading. Was Madame Marken right when she said they did not study human nature at the University, or is it true that no study can efface certain Divine convictions in the heart? Professor Mathius had met with many instances of low and grovelling natures; yet, in spite of experience, was no better prepared for them than if they were altogether new to him. Nothing that he had seen or heard of the young man sent him down so low in his opinion as this speech. Quite unconscious of the descent, Van Regensdorf, who had been gazing moodily at the opposite cushion, said, with a touch of insolence—

"If Heer Steen has anything to say, he can say it for himself."

"Do you mean that you want more? Oh, you can have it!" said the professor, grimly.

The men looked at each other with unfriendly eyes;

the younger one had a suspicion that here was the cause of Hilvardine's change towards him. Haunted by this suspicion, which he could not in the least explain, he cared little what he said; he was only anxious that his words should wound, and was careless whether at the same time they wounded Hilvardine. Careless, he always was.

"Say what you like, all of you!" he said, raising his voice. "She is mine—I have her promise."

"Her promise!" said Mathius, indignantly.

"Would you like proofs?" asked Van Regensdorf, with a sneer. "Plenty of letters have passed; there would be no difficulty in supplying you with a sample."

The professor had an almost irresistible impulse to pitch him out of the carriage, for he clearly understood the threat contained in this speech; but it showed him immediately that his own heat had been indiscreet; he had been too angry throughout to do much good.

"That may or may not be," he answered more coolly. "What I wish to point out is that it doesn't advance your cause. You know as well as I that you can never marry. She is a penniless girl; and you have a hundred expensive tastes. Look at it from a common-sense point of view, if you can't go any higher; ask yourself what is the good of it all? It is sheer folly to persist."

"That may or may not be," said the other, repeating Mathius' words with a disagreeable laugh. "Meanwhile we don't mean to look at it in that light. You should talk to Hilvardine, mijnheer."

The professor reddened slightly; this shaft had struck home. Van Regensdorf was watching him, and saw in a moment that his surmise was correct; it enraged him beyond measure, and made him swear not to release the hold he had on the girl. His was one of those im-

perious and obstinate natures, which cannot endure a crossing of their will. He was capable of drifting away from Hilvardine so soon as an opposite current began to affect him; that she should drift from him was another matter not to be thought of, and it roused his strongest resistance. To give up a possession is very different to having it wrenched from you. He had felt some pique and annoyance at Hilvardine's attempt this afternoon, but did not take her words seriously, or, at any rate, had sufficient confidence in his own powers not to doubt that by a little exertion he could win her back, as completely his own as ever. In a certain fashion he loved her, her beauty always stirred him, and her audacity gave her in his eyes an added charm. But this attack from Mathius showed him that something more serious lay beneath, and greatly raised his ire. And when we know that he was capable of remembering with satisfaction that the girl in her young folly had been both headstrong and imprudent in her expressions, and that he had a bundle of these letters in his keeping, it will be understood how extremely misplaced her attachment had been. Unfortunately, she was of a character to disdain getting her experiences second-hand, and would decline to be wiser except through her own observations.

By this time, however, she had made some that were effective. She was as imperious as Van Regensdorf; she scarcely doubted even now that he would give way to her will. His hint of a threat did not affect her so much as the revelation of himself which it brought. That was horrible. For here was her hero—whom she had upheld against warnings, against entreaties; whose sins she had white-washed, whose virtues she had exaggerated—showing a trail of such unutterable meanness, that her cheeks burnt at the thought. Having with all

the pains imaginable propped him on a pedestal, down her work had tumbled with a crash; it had been nothing but a clay statue, after all, and now all the world would laugh at her disaster. This for Hilvardine, who had a dread of ridicule, was unendurable. She paced up and down the room, driving away the affectionate but uncomprehending Constans, who was bubbling over with mild excitement.

"Aunt Johanna has Luce in her own room, and is putting Eau de Suez on her forehead. Oh, *weren't* you frightened! and what *did* you think was going to happen! It was so dreadful to see the horse rushing along. I wonder—don't you?—where it is now? Of course, it may do the same over and over again, unless—do you suppose that any one caught it?"

Hilvardine was silent.

"I do wonder—don't you?—how Heer van Regensdorp could be so brave! He must have been only just in time, for I don't see how poor Luce could ever have got out of the way. But I wish we had *quite* seen it. You did, I suppose you were so much nearer? Perhaps you might have been knocked down, too; oh, that would have been too dreadful!—that——"

"Constans, how unkind you are to let that wretched baby cry!"

"Cry? The dear baby! She is asleep. Hilvardine, you don't think I would leave her if she were crying——"

"You must go and see; I am sure I heard her."

"But do tell me—don't you think it was wonderfully brave of Heer——"

Constans found herself in the passage with the door slammed behind her. She wept a little, then dried her eyes, and went to the baby.

But these words of hers had touched another dis-

cordant string which Hilvardine had vainly attempted to keep mute. All the time she had been drearily conscious of its jar; there had never been a moment that she had not been holding it down with frightened force. Trying to deceive herself, she had maintained that she could carry out her new-born resolutions; but deep in her heart she knew that to-day's work would add tenfold to her difficulties, since he had gained a hold on her gratitude which could not easily be set aside. It was her own neglect which had exposed Luce to her danger, his bravery which had got her out of it; even that wasn't the end, but he must be grievously hurt in the act. Of all odious things which could have happened, surely this was the most odious! For the first time she felt herself aware of repugnant features in her lover, but to be aware of them at the moment when he had saved her little sister's life, made her appear yet more repugnant to herself. And taking herself to task was by no means a congenial occupation to Hilvardine. She preferred tossing doubtful things on one side, where they might lie like worthless letters, to be overhauled in some future time—which never came. It had seemed possible, though difficult, owing to influences she would not acknowledge, but which were at work, to defy public opinion to the extent of allowing Van Regensdorf to proclaim her a heartless jilt; but to confess herself this now—now, when he had brought all this on himself by his devotion to her, was a different thing. This really didn't seem possible. She felt a fever of remorse, of disgust. Whatever course she chose seemed to have as much wrong as right about it. She was in a vast perplexity, ready to beat herself and all the innocent people round. Naturally it only added to her irritation to feel that her perplexities were of her own digging. How could she have been so

foolish, so mad! Defiance as much as anything had been at the bottom of it; the silly girlish fancy might have quickly burned itself out if she had not insisted upon feeding it with anger at Johanna's interference. In fact, anything will do for fuel if we only heap it on the flames with a reckless hand, and so poor Johanna's words and deeds had been tossed in remorselessly. Her cheeks burned when she thought of her letters; and tried to recall certain expressions. What would they seem to another man, such a man, for instance, since in imagining a judge it is helpful to individualize him, as Professor Mathius? Instant conviction declared against herself.

She resolved—it was the only resolution she saw in clear outline—never to rest until she got back those letters. How? That nobody knew. But it was the burning determination of her heart.

How she dreaded the questioning which the presence of the younger ones had spared her as they drove home! But here she got off better than she dared expect. Johanna felt sure that a public upbraiding would be useless, and threw oil on the waters; the town councillor was sufficiently afraid of his daughter not to object to persuasion, while he made a grievance of concession. He, therefore, contented himself with asking how she met young Van Regensdorf at Zeist, and hearing that it was accidental, dropped the subject.

CHAPTER X.

COOTJE'S DIARY.

June 12th.—When I married I had not the smallest intention of being reduced at intervals to a humiliating widowhood; I pictured something much more brilliant. A deputy always gave me the impression of a man with a good deal of leisure on his hands to devote to his wife, sometimes I was almost afraid he might have too much. But it seems I was dreadfully mistaken. I did not calculate upon those horrible conferences, or committees, or whatever they may be. We have only been married four months, two weeks, and six days, and already Bernhard is whisked off to Berlin. It is very unfair. I said several times experimentally—I very nearly said it absolutely—that I should insist upon going, too; but every one was so tiresomely wise about it, and preached so much upon the heat, and the fatigue, and the long journey there and back, that, as I have unfortunately established rather a reputation for good sense at the Hague, I really did not dare to risk my reputation. It strikes me that one often pays for one's possessions. I thought it would be so advantageous for Bernhard if I was considered sensible, that I took immense pains to impress myself upon people in that character. I begin to think that I have laid up a store of rather dull decisions for myself, and that I should have done better to have begun with a little folly. Here, at home, I may be as silly as I please, there's no one to be shocked but my maid, and I am going to send her back to the Hague to-morrow, and the last shred of my dignities with her. My father is quite ready to forget them.

We persuade ourselves that I am just home from school; he buys me *heerenbrod* and chocolates; only this morning an exquisite carriage, drawn by the tiniest pair of mules, was waiting at the door for me. If Bernhard doesn't take care he will find no one but Cootje van Oord when he comes back; he shouldn't send me home if he doesn't expect me to unmarried myself. Heigh-ho! Poor dear Bernhard! He is too young to be a deputy, that's the fact—we are both too young. Most of the deputies have grey hair and loud voices; I am always impressing upon him that he looks rather ridiculous, and that no one will think of listening to him. Of course it isn't so. Heer Franzius says that whenever he speaks he makes his mark. I don't repeat this to Bernhard, because Heer Franzius is so *very* clever that it might turn his head, and at present he isn't one bit conceited—that I will say for him. I wonder what he is doing just now, dear fellow! As for me I am enjoying myself very well; there's no doubt of that. Till I came back this time, I don't think I ever realized the beauty of our beech woods, or the pleasure of strolling between their clean grey trunks. The lilies of the valley are over, of course—long ago; but every little country house seems to have a particularly fine show of flowers this summer, and it certainly is a pretty custom to have them bordering the roads. What with the little cool canals, and the trees and the flowers, I don't believe any country has such pretty roads as ours; and as for canals, any one who calls them uninteresting can just go behind our house and walk for a mile or two along the *trekvaart*. But at the Hague one meets with people who speak of our canals with so much contempt that—it certainly was horrid of me—I began to feel ashamed of them. At the Hague, somehow, one becomes less Dutch, more international; there are so

many foreigners, one has perpetually to be apologizing for the difficulties of one's language—I don't see why one should, considering that we are always expected to speak theirs, but it is a fact that I wish Scheveningen did not seem *quite* so impossible a word for strangers to pronounce. It is as easy as possible, really, but they make so much fuss over it that it gives it an air of barbarism.

To-morrow I am going to see Johanna Steen.

To-morrow has come and gone. I want to write down my impressions, because I hope that will make them more distinct. I could not gather the state of affairs from Johanna's letters; she does not write a good letter; she just gives you a sort of bordering of facts; it is like an outline of a work-pattern done in rather a dull colour. But I felt certain that when I saw her I should understand. Do I? I am not so sure.

There are one or two points which stand out clearly. She is allowing herself to be tyrannized over by that brother of hers, for one. And for another, Hilvardine is a handful—naturally enough. But—but—but—given all this, I don't think it goes to the root of Johanna's troubles. She has an almost aggravating power of making light of disagreeables; at times I could shake her for not admitting that she is annoyed by them. It's astonishing how people's virtues often vex you more than their faults, and I think Johanna's are just that sort. But yesterday she did not take her usual pains to convince me that everything was precisely as it should be; she was very grave, and her dear smooth forehead now and then puckered into lines. She was just as simple and frank as ever, doing everything for everybody, and having all the blame if things fell askew. I do think—except the baby—those are the most uninteresting children! But I don't feel I have got to the bottom; I have heard nothing about Cap-

tain Wrangel. Just as I was beginning, Constans walked into the room, wondering and supposing. If it is he who is making Johanna look grave, I shall hate him.

Last evening some people dined here, our cousins the Vanderbilts, Madame Marken, and a few others, among them two English ladies who have definite ideas about our country, and are a good deal disappointed that they don't meet storks walking along the Dutch roads. Madame Marken has not lost her broad expansive way of mentioning the faults of her neighbours, including your own: apparently she does not do it from malice, but from a conscientious feeling, which must become quite burdensome to her, that it is necessary she should speak her mind. She asked my father at dinner whether he was not particularly glad to have me without my husband.

"Husbands and wives are generally *de trop* in their relations' houses. People pretend to be friendly with their relations-in-law, but they really can't endure each other. Where is the use of pretending?"

"Very true," said my father with a smile.

"Oh, but I don't agree with you; indeed I don't! I like my sisters-in-law very much, and they are constantly with me!" said little Madame Vanderbilt, quite flushing with eagerness.

"Ah! but does your husband like his? I always watch to see whether husband's or wife's relations come most frequently to the house, then I know who has the upper hand."

"I congratulate you," said my father, with a bow.

She looked a little discomfited, but this could not last long. She asked me presently whether I had seen Professor Mathius?

"Not yet," I said.

"He is a great deal with the Steens. By the way, you were once great friends with Johanna, weren't you? If you still keep it up, you might give her some useful advice not to allow herself to be put upon. It is not advice you would ever require yourself, but she does."

"That's very general," remarked my father.

"Yes, I always am general," Madame Marken assented. "If you are particular, people don't like it."

"But who puts upon Johanna, as you express it?"

"Oh, every one. If you allow one person to do it, the others are certain to follow suit. She is trying to spare her brother home-worries, which he would be all the better for having to meet for himself, and she is trying to keep Hilvardine from being talked about——"

"Talked about!" I repeated, looking at Madame Vanderbilt.

"I am afraid it is partly true," she said sorrowfully.

"It is altogether true," asserted Madame Marken. "Don't you know that the girl encourages that disreputable young Van Regensdorf?"

"I know he has paid her attention. That's one thing."

"And accepting it is another. Well, that's just what she does; corresponds, meets him in her walks. The other day it came to a fine climax at Zeist where they were together, and he tried to pull her out of the way of a runaway horse, and got his own arm broken. A pretty scandal!"

"Come, come!" said my father peremptorily, "it seems to me we are taking away poor Mademoiselle Steen's character. She is a very handsome girl, and will grow wiser as she grows older, as we all do."

"Oh, I don't think the worse of her," said Madame Marken, philosophically; "but she is the young duckling

among Johanna's chickens." Then hearing one of the English ladies make some remark about cucumbers being yellow in Holland, she pounced down upon her. "My dear lady, but you are not in Holland now! Holland is only one of our overgrown provinces. We have a province of our own."

She dashed off on several instructive topics. My father, meanwhile, suggested that if we had finished our strawberries we might walk to the *trekvaart*, where he had ordered the boats to be ready. The evening was cool and delicious. We walked for some distance under the beeches, and then struck away to the right, where is a small lake, and where the trees were of varied kinds, and grew in lesser masses. The copper beeches in the late lights gleamed like bronze; here and there a variegated elm tossed its light foliage against their splendid gloom. The silvery lights on the canal were exquisite. There was not a ripple on its broad surface, so that every cloud, every tree, every tuft of grass on the towing path cast its tender reflection. Two boats were waiting, and the men, with towing-ropes and broad leathern belts round their bodies, started at once, walking as easily as if we were not behind them. Nothing, not even the movement of a gondola, can be so soothing as this way of being drawn through the water; you glide without any conscious motion—things pass you, that is all. It is absolute calm. Every now and then a clumsy picturesque barge, with brown sails and oddly mixed bits of colour, green and red, and yellow, came slowly sailing down upon us, every line and each bright point of colour reflected in the clear water. Two men, or a boy and girl, would be towing, ropes would be lifted, our boats would pass under, and away we slipped into a world of green reflections; scarcely breaking their glassy surface as we

floated over them. Here an old grey moated house stood back a little from the bank; there sat a happy family-party drinking tea in a summer-house built close to the water's edge, their boat moored below them; now and then a little covered carriage, filled with laughing children and drawn by a pair of donkeys, would be trotted merrily along the road bordering the canal; the beautiful summer evening with its sunshine, its long shadows, and its delicate sky, had an indescribable loveliness. We all sang Mendelssohn's "Return of the Nightingale," and as for me, I had quite an attack of sentiment when I thought of Bernhard.

16th.—Many little things have happened, and I have got hold of some impressions at last; I had almost begun to despair of them. But it is certain that I don't feel my impressions so distinctly as I used; I am afraid it must be that I have so often allowed Bernhard to modify them, that when he isn't here I begin mechanically to do it myself. Of course I am thinking of Johanna. She came here yesterday alone; the baby, and Hendrik, and Luce, and Constans, and Hilvardine, and that helpless town councillor, all disposed of, for a wonder! It was hot, and I made her come with me to the little lake, and then we got into the boat which is moored under the trees, and sat in the cool shade. For some time she fenced very successfully with the questions I put, and if I had allowed compassion to get the better of me, I suppose I should have left her alone; but I was sure that meant letting her be sacrificed. I did everything I could for her, however: I turned my back, and leaned over the side of the boat, and dipped my hand into the water. Then I said—

"Is it true that Hilvardine is getting herself talked about?"

"Who told you?"

"Madame Marken."

"I need not have asked. Yes; people talk, and I am afraid I have managed very badly," she said, sighing.

"It is your fault, of course. Everything that goes at all wrong is your fault. Do you know that it is likely there will be a failure in the colza crop this year, and that you are very much to blame?"

She put two warm hands round my arm, and her face on my shoulder. "So Bernhard has not broken you of teasing?"

"Bernhard! Broken me! My dear Johanna, you don't understand our respective positions. I must certainly give you a lesson. By the way——" she knew what was coming, I felt a momentary tightening of her hands—"By the way, there is a great deal which you must tell me about Captain Wrangel. Pray, when are you to be married? I have asked again and again without having any answer vouchsafed."

There was a moment's pause; then she said with a hard little laugh—

"Dear Cootje, are your thoughts still entirely taken up with marrying and being married? I assure you there are other things in one's life of equal importance."

"At any rate it's the chief thing when once it has become the question."

"I don't agree with you. Sometimes it has no right to be considered the chief thing."

"Johanna, if I did not know better I should call you——"

"What?"

"Cold-blooded."

She leaned forward and said with some eagerness—

"I suspect you would be right. Lately I have often

said to myself that I *am* cold-blooded. You are quite welcome to your verdict."

"Thank you. But I still respect the traditions of my youth. If you, too, remember them, it may strike you that I generally got an answer to my questions. When are you going to marry Captain Wrangel?"

She said hastily, "I don't know;" and then in a very low voice, "Perhaps, never."

"What stands in the way? Your brother's family?"

"I suppose so," she said with an effort. But as I was beginning to fall upon her, she stopped me. "There is really no use in talking about it, and though you have mentioned one reason, there are others."

"Ah, that's not fair! I hate those kind of underground surprises. As if there were anything which you might not tell me!"

She looked at me hesitatingly. I am certain she was considering.

"I'm not so sure of that," she began slowly. "But—well, you must know that there are often quite impalpable things which stand in the way as effectually as decided barriers?"

"I know that impalpable is often another word for imaginary," I said.

"I don't think these are imaginary," she answered, still very slowly. "I don't think so."

"Johanna, whatever has not to do with your brother's family must be connected simply with you or Captain Wrangel."

"Well?" she said, and I heard her give a quick sob.

"Well—have either of you changed?"

"Is it like me to change?"

"No. Is it like him?"

There was a silence; then she said—

"Cootje, we women can be very patient. It is harder—oh, much harder for men! I ought not to have expected Arent to be ready to wait longer when he has had so much waiting already."

I was so struck by the justice of this that I said immediately, "Haven't I told you so a dozen times?"

"Well, you were right," she said in a voice which she had tried to make light, but which was full of pain. "I'll give you that satisfaction. I cannot marry without waiting, and I cannot inflict this any longer upon him, so we shall both be free."

I had not meant to lead to this conclusion.

"Johanna, that is impossible if——"

This time she stopped my mouth with her hands.

"Dear, if you love me as I think you do, don't ask any more questions. They can do no good—they only hurt. Take my word for it, things must stay as they are; no one can straighten them. It is like you to try, and I like to feel how much you care. But, Cootje—please!"

What could I do? Only kiss her, and pretend not to see the tears in her dear brave eyes, and turn the subject. I was dreadfully disappointed to find there was nothing I was to be allowed to do; one always fancies that if two persons love each other, a word or two may set things right, and it would be a satisfaction. She said only one thing more: I was to understand that they were all excellent friends. Now, if I were Captain Wrangel, and my hopes had ended in this ineffective position, I should be too wroth for friendship. I begin to fear that he can't be as steadfast as I fancied him.

Johanna has promised to come again to-morrow on condition that she may bring Hilvardine; and I am to drive them back after dinner, in the cool evening.

18th.—We were not quite alone, after all. It is im-

possible to be sure of my father, whose hospitable impulses can never endure the slightest restraint. He brought home an Englishman, a Colonel Sanderson, who is engaged in walking through the Netherlands, looking at Dutch farms. He is a tall dark military-looking man, with a thick moustache and a short beard. I don't know that I have anything more to say about him, and I am sure he did not trouble himself to bestow much attention upon us, though Hilvardine did her best. He was bent upon acquiring information.

After dinner we went for his benefit into the kitchen garden, where he solemnly inspected all the crops, and made notes of the asparagus beds. This finished, we marched along the road towards the farm. There Johanna and I stayed outside the gate while the others went in. She said presently—

“Don't you think her wonderfully pretty?”

“Hilvardine? I don't know. I believe my admiration has a way of resting on a small foundation of prejudice. If I don't like people, I don't admire them.”

“You might like her.”

“How is that young knight of her's going on, with his wounded arm?”

“It makes me very unhappy,” said Johanna gravely.

“His arm?”

“No. The entanglement.”

“But if her father does not consent she cannot marry; not, at any rate, until she is thirty, and by that time the attraction will certainly have worn itself out.”

“I am not afraid of their marrying. Do you suppose young Van Regensdorf would even wish to marry a girl without a fortune? But meanwhile the poor child is compromising herself in the eyes of the world. I fear they write to each other, and when she is out with the

children he joins her. Of course, just now there is a respite."

I listened to her perplexities, but felt no interest in them. Hilvardine may make a goose of herself to the last feather if only Johanna's happiness is not wrecked. I wanted to hear more of Captain Wrangel, and it was very annoying to see Madame Marken appearing in the distance. She is staying at our nearest neighbour's.

"One moment, Johanna," I said hastily. "I have been thinking over what you said the other day. You contrived not to enlighten me much, after all, but I believe I am very indignant with Captain Wrangel."

She had listened gravely, but at this she looked greatly disturbed.

"If you are, you are extremely unjust. No one is to blame."

"Not even you!" I said, with a laugh.

Madame Marken was near at hand by this time, and waving her umbrella to make us wait for her.

"How pale you look, Johanna!" she said by way of greeting. "You wear yourself out over those children and their affairs—you are too conscientious by half; you worry and fret yourself. Why?—because Hilvardine is a silly child and gives us a little something to talk about. We ought all really to be much obliged to her."

"I am sure you are," I said.

"Yes, I like gossip," she replied, imperturbably; "but I find that as one grows older one grows more fastidious. It used to amuse me to see my neighbours making fools of themselves; now it annoys me. Johanna, you like abstract questions: how do you account for the change?"

"I suppose you have read your Bible more," said Johanna, so simply that Madame Marken was a little disconcerted.

She gave her a quick sidelong look, and then laughed.

"Well, that's the most charitable view of my motives that I have encountered for a long while. You are a good girl, Johanna, and I am sorry for you. But I suppose it is useless to talk, for when once people take into their heads that heaven and earth require them to sacrifice themselves, it is the most hopeless craze in the world. How is your brother? If he wants rousing, tell him to come in and see me some evening."

Johanna, I could see, was not highly charmed with this invitation. She told me afterwards that, though she did not agree with those who considered Madame Marken malicious, she was a little afraid of her habit of peering into and settling her neighbours' affairs. But we had no time for any more talk, for the gentlemen and Hilvardine came out of the farm, and Colonel Sanderson was immensely taken up with the subject of cheeses. We walked back by the side of the meadows, under the beautiful trees. The sky was flooded with delicate golden lights, there was an indescribable peacefulness and hush; the long grass was unstirred by even a breath of wind.

But the more I think of Captain Wrangel, the more furious I feel. If he loved Johanna, of course he would wait—a hundred years! But if he has changed! Is there any one else? The bare idea is horrid enough to make one lose all one's faith in mankind. I shall write to Bernhard this evening and tell him that he must come home at once; I cannot trust him out of my sight.

CHAPTER XI.

“The boy-reviler! Amply filled
With venom'd virulence, and skilled
To look on what is good and fair,
And find or make a blemish there.”

FOR a few days after the Zeist accident there was what could only be described as a dead calm. To Hilvardine it seemed so unnatural as to be loaded with menace, like the brooding stillness which foretells a storm. Van Regensdorf made no sign. Of course the town councillor went to call upon him in order to express his gratitude—he could not put Johanna forward for this disagreeable office—but he was refused admittance, and told that the young man was doing well, but ordered quiet by the doctor. Heer Steen retired with alacrity. A letter—which Johanna might compose—would be a less awkward way of delivering himself of mixed sentiments, and he felt no anxiety on the sufferer's account, suspecting that he was probably amusing himself very well in his room. His card, indeed, was received there with a roar.

“The Heer father! Oh, heroic succourer of damsels, shall you adopt a horse for your crest henceforth?”

“He will buy *that* horse.”

“Van Regensdorf has never been on such good terms with the University before.”

“Because it's the first time he's been ever known to stop anything. Generally, he runs away with himself.”

“So now the professors have a little hope. I wish them joy of their subject.”

These brilliant remarks came from Van Hoopt and the younger student whom the professor had called Arnheim. They were in Van Regensdorf's room waiting for the arrival of a fourth to play cards, and meanwhile had been indulging their witty sallies at the expense of the least popular among the professors. They had nicknames for most of them, originating, of course, in personal appearance or peculiarities, and very popular with a certain set, since, after having been compelled to endure the tedium of a learned lecture, it was a fine thing to be able to call the lecturer Heer Long Ears, and at once brought them up to his level. Van Regensdorf had always been a leading inventor of these names; his hits were sure of loud laughter and flattering appreciation, particularly when the wives and daughters came in for a share in the distinction.

"Has Dominie Donkey been holding forth to-day?" he inquired, lighting a cigar.

"Dominie Donkey?"

This was new. Van Hoopt and Arnheim looked at each other, ready to laugh, but uncertain to whom it might apply.

"Old Mathius," explained Van Regensdorf, impatiently. "It hits his dull preaching to the life."

"To the life!" roared Arnheim. But Van Hoopt moved uneasily.

"Come, that isn't fair," he muttered; "Mathius is a good fellow, and no one preaches less. Where would you have been if he hadn't tied you up the other day?"

"Where I am," said the other contemptuously. "*Pouf!* as if any of you fellows couldn't have done it just as well! A canting, hypocritical cur! I hate him, I tell you!"

"Van Regensdorf got pitched into," said Arnheim, slyly nudging his companion. "The professor and the

town councillor are great allies. You've had your last walk with your pretty Miss Hilvardine, my friend!"

"Have I?" said the other, with an oath. "If you lay your money on that, it will be the worst speculation that ever you tried in your life. She shall walk with me in the teeth of them all, and if your precious professor thinks to interfere with me, the best piece of advice Van Hoopt, who, it seems, is his dear friend, can give him, is to get back to Leyden before he is kicked there."

"Friend!" repeated Van Hoopt sullenly. "We're not the sort he's likely to choose for his friends! But for all that, and though one may be a fool, one need not be quite so much of a fool as not to know good stuff from bad, and he did something once for a fellow I know—Besides, I think if Van Regensdorf does get Mejufvrouw Steen to write to him, as he says he does, he should keep it to himself, and Mathius has a right to be angry."

"Has he? Then you may tell him from me—and yourself at the same time—that I can manage my own affairs without interference."

"Oh, keep cool! I'm not going to interfere; it's nothing to me. It is something to Mathius, and he'd be a cur if he didn't speak up."

"Where's the harm?" put in Arnheim pacifically.

"You'd see the harm if it were your sister."

"Leave him alone, Arnheim," sneered Van Regensdorf; "he's going in for the professorship of morals, and you and I are not good enough for his saintship." He added, with a sudden change of tone, "I'll have no meddling, Van Hoopt, so look out!"

"Keep your threats for those who mind them," retorted the other, with a frown.

He strolled towards the door as he spoke, and Arnheim said anxiously—

"You're not going? Jansen will be here presently with the cards."

"I've no fancy for cards just now."

He went out without glancing at Van Regensdorf, and Arnheim came back into the room looking vexed.

"If I were to follow him I think I could bring him back. Why couldn't you keep your temper? He throws his money away like a sieve. Shall I try him again?"

"No," said the other, savagely; "let him go for a fool!"

His was one of those sullen vindictive tempers which grow the more sullenly obstinate by opposition. He would not give up Hilvardine, he would not allow her to give him up; she should do as he bade her, and if ever the time came that they fell apart, it should be by his own act and no other's. A few days ago, knowing her daring nature, he might not have felt so sure of his power, but in their last interview he had been quick to detect a lurking dread of public opinion, which he had never discovered before. For the professor, he hated him as a small soul will hate a large one, so that the very fact of his taking an interest in the matter was enough to rouse his worst passions.

Besides, he suspected.

Hilvardine herself waited, sick with terror, feeling as if the town were ringing with her last adventure, as if every chance allusion were pointed; and when inquiries were made for the broken arm, she could not speak, leaving all explanations to Johanna. Mathius did not come near them, and she reflected that after his remonstrances to find her almost immediately repeating her line of conduct was a very successful way of disgusting him. Besides, it was probable that in his drive back with his patient he had gathered particulars enough to blame her

with all his honest heart. She longed passionately to exculpate herself, yet what could she say?

Johanna saw something of the struggle that was going on; at any rate, saw that Hilvardine was unhappy, but could not be sure why. It might be from newly awakened shame; it might be because Van Regensdorf was suffering—she got no confidence, and had ceased to expect it; but she was conscious of relief from the dread of not knowing where the girl might be, now that for a time, at least, their torment was safe in a sick-room. She had quite enough to think of in her own concerns, which seemed to have left her stranded by the lowest of tides. Even if circumstances create our misfortunes they are hard enough to bear, but she could not but be aware that in her case circumstances were only effective in bearing the brunt of the why and wherefore. The real thing had been a change in Arent. Whether this were brought about by anger at her resolution, or by seeing some one more attractive in Hilvardine she tried to put out of consideration. When a fact exists there is not much satisfaction in walking round and round and trying to make out why it came there and how, though some minds appear to enjoy the evolution. Johanna, at any rate, found only misery was to be got out of it. She did not know how she could have acted otherwise, even now—reflecting on ill results which had not presented themselves so definitely before her at the time—she felt, had it all to be done over again, she must have repeated herself. But in her heart of hearts, she had the bitter conviction that Arent's love had lost its old force, or even her opposition could not have shaken it. Perhaps she allowed too much power to love, and too little to pride, which can be a strong rival; perhaps her singularly direct and simple nature failed to comprehend more

complex workings; at any rate, she did not understand how it should have been, except by the explanation that he had found some one he could love better. She thought very humbly of herself, so that it was by no means difficult for her to accept this explanation; but whether people accept it or not doesn't lessen the smart, and it was tenfold aggravated by the conviction that all Hilvardine's share in the matter was, to her, absolute trifling. It must be said, moreover, that as yet she was not sure of Arent's actual position towards herself. She could not feel as if all were over for ever.

Perhaps this was not remarkable; perhaps he was not sure himself. He had come over more than once from Amsterdam, but had never called at the Steens since the day when he had talked to Johanna under the trees. If he had any thought of Hilvardine he might—without being accused of over-scrupulosity—have considered it a little indelicate to present his change of affection so quickly to the world; while, if he had no thought of anybody, it was remarkable that he should come at all. Yet there he was. Madame Marken met him again one day as she was crossing a bridge near the fish-market. The weather was thick and sultry; the canals, become stagnant, had lost their beautiful silvery reflections; most of the townspeople had gone off to Scheveningen or Sandvoort, or even as far as Norderney and the North Sea.

"I am suffocated," was Madame Marken's greeting. "I can't imagine how you sailors can breathe on shore. I never felt more disposed to take a voyage, if only in a *trekschuyt*."

"May I ask why?"

"Because I'm dying to go somewhere, and I can't afford it. That consideration doesn't stand in the way

of some of my friends, to be sure. But then, I have old-fashioned ideas."

"Do you mean that one is old-fashioned?"

"Of course I do. Paying your way, keeping your engagements; oh, everything of that sort is out of date, as I dare say you know." She darted a malicious look at him. He was evidently discomposed, and she went on quickly, "I'm more conscientious, you see, and deserve something agreeable. Will you come and lunch with me? It is just half-past twelve. No, you need not cast about for an excuse, because I don't intend to take one."

That morning Cootje had driven in for Johanna, and carried her off for an hour or two. While the Steens were at their midday meal, Betje appeared with a message from Madame Marken. Would it trouble Mejufvrouw Steen to bring the work-pattern she had promised her?

"That tattling woman!" muttered Frans.

"Say—no, say nothing, but that she shall have it presently," said Hilvardine. "Constans, you can take it."

When Constans, however, declared herself ready, her sister had changed her mind. She would take it herself. To tell the truth, it was with the idea that from Madame Marken she might hear the worst that was said of her, and she always wanted to know the worst. That did not make her dread the visit and her hostess' sharp tongue less, but she rang the bell boldly.

"Now for my experiment," said Madame Marken, as she heard the sound. She kept her eyes on Captain Wrangel, and, as the name was announced, saw his face alter and then suddenly light up.

"He is glad, after all," she thought, looked round, and beheld Hilvardine. "You! But it was Johanna I wanted!" she said, much put out.

"I thought it was the pattern. Aunt Johanna is with Madame van Weede," said Hilvardine, as carelessly as she could.

She read Madame Marken's manner as another sign of the general disapproval; her heart sank, there was nothing more strange in the girl than this new sensitive-ness. Madame Marken quickly recovered herself, beginning to see promise of entertainment in an unexpected combination. She felt it capable of enlightening her almost better than the other could have done. She became suddenly cordial.

"Of course I am glad to see you. I felt quite selfish at having no one here while Captain Wrangel told me all about his last voyage. It is like a fairy-tale, especially when one has to spend one's life in this country of prose and straight lines. I dare say, however, that you have heard it all already."

"I have heard nothing," said Hilvardine, keeping her grey eyes on the ground. She suddenly lifted them, and looked, smiling, at Captain Wrangel; but he had walked towards the window, and lost the glance. Madame Marken began to fear that her puppets would not dance, and to feel spiteful.

"Ah, you have been too much taken up with your accident," she said significantly.

"Accident!" Arent repeated this quickly, coming back.

"Oh, not to her; don't be alarmed! But you should hear the story, it is charmingly romantic," Madame Marken said, darting an amused look at Hilvardine.

The girl did not betray herself by a movement. She said composedly—

"Do you care to hear it? We were at Zeist one day, and my little sister and I walked in the road while the others were at the Broederhuis. A runaway horse would

have knocked down Luce, if Heer van Regensdorf, one of the students, had not snatched her out of the way. Unfortunately, his own arm was broken."

"Oh, he won't die of it," said Madame Marken. "What do you think of that for an adventure, Captain Wrangel?"

"I do not think he was unfortunate at all," he said, gazing at the girl, a gaze which made her hostess nod her head sagaciously.

"It is as I thought," she reflected. "That unlucky Johanna!"

Hilvardine's spirits rose; she loved admiration; just now she had an almost hungry craving for something which showed that the verdict would not be universally given against her. Captain Wrangel had an exacting temper, but nothing here was rubbing it the wrong way. Madame Marken was amused and therefore amiable. They were all very gay when the bell rang again, and Professor Mathius was announced. When he came in the three formed a small circle, Hilvardine was between the others, and Arent, leaning forward, looked intently at her. Johanna came into the professor's mind at the moment, and he felt an immediate disagreeable impression, heightened by Hilvardine's blush as she rose to speak to him; she was decidedly embarrassed. Evidently his entrance checked conversation. Arent, who had some feeling in his mind not quite friendly to Mathius, walked off to the window. Madame Marken, conscious that she was experimentalizing in a somewhat unwarrantable fashion, was not altogether easy. Self-reproach, however, could not last long with her, she began to accept the professor as a new ingredient, and to set to work to make what she could out of him.

"Are visits like old prints, valuable for their rarity?"

she demanded. "If so I ought to think a deal of this one."

"I don't pay visits of ceremony," said he, with a smile. "I go to my friends when they want me, or——"

"Or?"

"When I want them."

"Ah, now the secret is out, I need not feel so much flattered. Well, mijnheer, what is it?"

He was looking attentively at Hilvardine, and hesitated. The blush had not died out of her face, and it gave an added brilliancy to her beauty; she was talking to Captain Wrangel, who had resumed his position and his occupation of staring at her. Mathius felt a touch of anger with them both, and no longer hesitated.

"They tell me you know everybody," he said, turning to Madame Marken.

"A representative everybody? Well?"

"Do you know Monsieur and Madame van Regensdorf? They live at the Hague."

"Yes, I know them. He is an invalid."

"But I suppose she could come to see her son?"

"I suppose so. But why? Is he worse?"

He looked again at Hilvardine; she did not glance in his direction, and he thought her unfeeling.

"No. He doesn't give himself much chance; but he gets on as well as can be expected when that is allowed for. Still—don't people generally come to see their sons when they are ill?"

"Not the Monsieurs and Madames van Regensdorf of my acquaintance," said Madame Marken, with a shrug. "However, I can tell them what you suggest."

"Thank you," said Mathius, staring at a spot in the carpet. After a minute or two of silence he went on,

"There are times in a man's life when home influences have a chance; at any rate, it's right to try them."

"He's not worth much," Madame Marken returned contemptuously.

Hilvardine was talking and smiling with a great deal of animation. Not a sign showed that she was attending to the conversation of which, nevertheless, she had not lost a word. The professor frowned.

"People are sometimes worth what others make them," he said shortly.

"Well, don't accuse me of making or marring," said Madame Marken, unmoved. "I'm only a mouth-piece. Others think things, and I say them. You know that very well, or you would not have come here to-day. But 'Madame Marken doesn't mind; she will get through any amount of disagreeable speeches!' And so it is I who must write to the Van Regensdorfs, 'The authorities at the University can do nothing themselves with your graceless, ne'er-do-well son; so now that he is tied by the leg or the arm, or whatever it may be, come and read him a lecture!' Have I got my lesson rightly, mijnheer? or shall we ask Hilvardine for her advice?"

"Ask no one," said Mathius abruptly. "I suppose there is no question whether a man can receive a visit from his mother? And that is all I will beg Madame Marken to suggest."

"Ah, you like your wire-pullers to avoid over-intelligence. Take care; they will be the more sagacious behind your back."

He looked at her, but said nothing. It was not of her that he was thinking, but of Hilvardine, whose conduct filled him with angry perplexity. He was simple-hearted enough not to understand it. While he believed

that she loved Van Regensdorf, however much the mistake might be regretted, it was straightforward enough, and might be based on a generous foundation. Inexperience he fondly conceived to be the cause of most women's errors. Madame Marken would have been immensely amused at his estimate, which set down shortcomings to ignorance and a little amiable weakness. Perhaps Hilvardine would have been equally astonished. Amiable weakness was the last characteristic she would have chosen for herself. Her present action was owing to her anxiety to make it clear that her feelings towards Van Regensdorf were not of the romantic nature which the world credited her with. Under this pressure she accepted eagerly Captain Wrangel's admiration, carelessly supposing that it was a phase which would pass, and that when it was over he would return to Johanna again. Meanwhile, she was not unwilling that Johanna should have this check; and she cared so little for Arent, as to consider his attentions a mere matter of indifference.

With the professor this was a different matter; this darkened his face. It would be bad enough for her to transfer her affections so quickly; it was a hundred times worse if she were capable of accepting the allegiance which rightly belonged to another. To give that a distinct name, in short, was to call it treachery. And to find it possible to say this of any girl, above all of a girl who seemed to be so beautiful, so lovable, what could be more painful? He felt a tingling sensation of shame, as if he were the culpable person, when he remembered Johanna's pale and grave face. He was so much taken up with his own thoughts as to be unconscious that Madame Marken, with one of her quick transitions, had left the Van Regensdorfs far behind. She was saying—

"It is very hard that because one is poor one mayn't even be cool."

"Pray explain that enigma," said Captain Wrangel.

"How can one be cool in a stifling brick town? All the people who can scrape a little money together are off to the sea. Poverty is odious; don't you think so, Heer Mathius?"

"I have never tried anything else."

"Nor I, Heaven knows! But I see something else; and so do you."

"Let us go for a day to the woods," said Hilvardine suddenly.

Madame Marken looked at her, and then at the others.

"Well," she said slowly, "it is not such a bad idea. We might go to Arnheim by rail, and drive out to Rosendaal and Felp. Yes; that will do very well. Captain Wrangel, Heer Mathius, you will both come?"

Arent agreed eagerly; Mathius hesitated. To say the truth, he thought that if he went he might see what he disliked; the prospect was not very attractive. But Madame Marken persisted.

"We are the originators; there must be no defaulters. And, Hilvardine, make your father come. He wants cheering; none of you know how to treat him, so that the poor man is moped to death. This is Saturday; let us say Tuesday. Johanna can ask Madame van Weede, and then she will be happy."

Madame Marken reflected that all these jarring elements brought together would certainly produce amusement. She would have liked to have added Van Regensdorf had it been practicable; she found herself regretting that his presence could not give the touch of completion to her entertainment.

CHAPTER XII.

“I never knew her
As otherwise than patient, brave, and true.”

MATHIUS generally went to the cathedral at ten o'clock on Sunday mornings. It was like the other churches as to its cold whitewashed walls—without one break of gracious colour—its hideous deal erections, and a general bareness and unloveliness. But in the cathedral, in spite of all this, there was an occasional outlet in which the imagination might find relief—outline of columns, spring of arches, generous height of roof. All was marred by the deadening whitewash, but there were hidden possibilities, even an occasional minute revelation. The professor was in a reflective mood, and before the pastor appeared, while singing and reading were conducted by the reader, he watched the crowded congregation. The town councillor's family was a little late; Heer Steen went to his place among the men, Johanna and her charges filed into the pew near the high pulpit from which all the service was read. Hilvardine was flushed and beautiful; Mathius could scarcely remove his gaze from her face. By her side Johanna looked pale and saddened; she kept her eyes on her book, and nothing could be seen of their sweet and steadfast expression; evidently, like the rest of the great congregation, she listened with extreme devotion to the long address of an hour and a half which made up the service, broken only by occasional hymns, fervently sung, and the twice handing round of collecting-bags at the ends of long rods.

When they all came out, Mathius joined the Steens,

so did Madame van Weede and her father, the burgo-master. Hilvardine immediately propounded the plan for Tuesday, and Cootje, who was beginning to find herself a little dull, warmly entered into it. Johanna said nothing; and Mathius, who happened to be near her, remarked with a smile upon her want of enthusiasm.

"I will be as enthusiastic as you please," she answered, smiling also, "provided you don't ask me to be one of the party."

Mathius began to speak, and checked himself. He was conscious she had a right to dislike having such a meeting forced upon her, yet he had a conviction that Captain Wrangel was not worth what she was wasting upon him, and thought it a pity she could not be disabused. But as he could not hint this without impertinence, he said merely, "We shall not get on very well without you."

Cootje caught the words, and turned round.

"Without whom?" she asked.

"Freule Johanna is not attracted by our day in the woods."

"Oh, but she will come," said Cootje, nodding. "Go on, mijnheer, and let me use my powers of persuasion; you don't know how strong they are." And when he had moved on to Hilvardine's side she went on, "Seriously, Johanna, you must come."

"I am serious, too."

"Yes; but you are making a mistake."

"What mistake? Can't you conceive that my position may be a very painful one?"

"I can conceive its awkwardness. The pain ought all to be on his side."

"That would imply that what has happened has cost him more than it has cost me. You must love me dearly

for your affection to blind you to such an extent," said Johanna, with a touch of bitterness.

"I want your pain to be kept to yourself," said the other, changing her ground.

"Do I go about complaining of it?"

"You are only too brave, too unselfish. Let the world see what you are."

"Oh, the world, the world! What do I care for the world!"

"My dear, we all care—even people so good and dear as you are. I don't want Madame Marken and her tribe to go about holding up their hands, and saying, 'That poor girl! Only think how sad it is for her to have been jilted by Captain Wrangel!' Oh, you need not interrupt me; I know that does not accurately express the state of the case, but it is quite near enough for them. 'So sad! There he was with them at Beckhuizen the other day, and she could not endure to meet him, and stayed away.' Do you like that position, Johanna?"

"No. Yet it is the truth."

"The truth, but not the whole truth. Come, be courageous."

"Ah, to be courageous when all that one gains by courage is a little added pain for oneself!"

"More perhaps for the moment; less afterwards. Besides, there is another reason."

"What is that?" Johanna asked wearily.

"I am not sure whether you have told me all that there is to tell. If you have, if really you do not understand the position more clearly than I do, I think you would be happier for gaining a definite outline for your troubles, and for knowing exactly how you stand."

"Happier for gaining a definite outline!" repeated

Johanna, shaking her head and smiling sadly. "Ah, Cootje, it is easy to see that your own sorrows have little deserved the name, or you would know that to have something vague and indefinite about them, some opening for impossible possibilities, is the consolation one clings to the most eagerly. I suppose it is foolish—one does not think much about that. Well, you think that if I go to Beckhuizen, I shall no longer be able to deceive myself? Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I had better face it—all."

Never before had she spoken so distinctly, or admitted that she was suffering. Cootje's heart bled. She would have liked to have thrown her arms round her, and told her to stay at home and spare herself all the pangs which she felt sure were waiting for her; but she was too wise a friend. She believed, as she said, that it was better for Johanna to see all with her own eyes, see that Captain Wrangel was not acting from anger with her so much as from love for another. Judging by herself, Cootje was certain no better cure could be offered to any one. She already detested Captain Wrangel so warmly, that she perhaps found it difficult to realize that love does not so quickly turn to hate. But she registered a secret vow, to be on the watch to give what comfort lay in her power and to spare her as much pain as she could. Moreover, her brain or her heart, or whatever may be the central point of our benevolence, immediately fell to busy weaving of other suggestions for Johanna's protection, and she reflected that it was not impossible to enlist the professor on her side. It was characteristic of the man that people instinctively turned to him.

The town councillor had promptly negatived the idea of accompanying his family, and almost succeeded in impressing them with the conviction that they had been

indecent in asking him. On Sunday he met Madame Marken; on Monday he threw out a hint that a little pressure might shake his resolution; and when this had been applied by Johanna, who honestly thought he would be the better for the break in his daily routine, he yielded with a show of reluctance.

"But Madame Marken thinks I have no right to give myself up to the luxury of grief," he said.

"Madame Marken!" repeated Johanna, with surprise, for she was the last person she expected her brother to quote. "Still, she is quite right, dear Frans."

"I doubt whether we have appreciated her as she deserves. She has an extraordinary amount of discernment." Then as Johanna gave a dismayed laugh, he went on with some heat, "Women never understand each other, and if they once adopt a prejudice, they wear it to tatters. You and Hilvardine might derive great advantages from having her as a neighbour; but she feels hurt from your unfriendliness."

"Oh, I am not unfriendly," said Johanna, gently.

"Then, pray do not allow Hilvardine to make herself disagreeable."

Johanna was silent. She could not, and she would not, control Hilvardine's fancies; she heartily wished that all of them were as excusable as this. But Frans was a person with whom explanations were difficult. He always managed to see as much or as little as suited his purpose, and to hang his arguments upon that and no more. People who wanted to present him with a broad view of matters, found themselves frustrated by the simplest process in the world.

At all events, Madame Marken, as the head of an expedition to the woods, had clear and distinct virtues. She arranged matters like a general, and her powers of

combination were admirable. The consequence was that they were at Arnheim before the freshness of the morning was over, and driving to Rosendaal. One carriage held Madame Marken, the town councillor, Captain Wrangel, and Hilvardine; the other Cootje, Johanna, Constans, and the professor.

About Arnheim, as has been said, the whole character of the country is changed; the flats have given way to softly swelling outlines, and the canals, the most distinctive feature of the Netherlands, exist no longer. The town itself is hot and glaring, but the neighbourhood is pleasantly wooded, and they drove along shady roads, under trees through which the sunshine broke in cheerful patches.

Madame Marken's carriage, which went first, was the most gay. Snatches of talk and of laughter came back to the others. It was evident they were having a good time, and Constans craned her neck and exhausted her imagination with guesses at what they might be talking about.

"For it seems so odd to think that papa should not mind," she explained. "At home he hushes us up if he thinks there is too much noise; and I am sure we never laugh like that. Aunt Johanna, what do you think can amuse them so much? Hilvardine must be in very good spirits, and that must be the reason—don't you think so? When she likes, she can be so amusing, she makes us die of laughing. But not when *papaatje* is near, that is what I mean."

Constans was fond of elaborate explanations; nothing was too minute for her handling, and she had a conscientious, microscopic reverence for detail. Johanna, who was really fond of her, tried to induce her to lay on her colours in broader and less stippling fashion, and

Constans' slow, patient good temper never took offence. That was something; indeed, it was a good deal, since objects for irritation were not wanting in the town councillor's family. But she was so heavy-handed in her treatment of subjects that she constantly provoked Cootje.

"Oh, never mind the others!" she exclaimed with sharpness. "Let us amuse ourselves, or, rather, let the professor entertain us."

"To be told to be amusing!" said Mathius, shrugging his shoulders. "Only a woman could possibly succeed in such an attempt."

"By the way, we have something to accuse you of. Madame Marken assured me you have been heard to declare that women should follow and not lead."

"Madame Marken is dangerous if she credits me with such presumptuous statements. At any rate, she lives to refute them."

Johanna, who had been looking away from the others without hearing their talk, turned round. "I have been wishing to ask you, mijnheer," she said, "how your patient gets on. Has his mother come from the Hague?"

"Madame van Regensdorf? She appeared yesterday. Such women don't deserve the name of mother," he said, frowning.

"Perhaps we don't understand them," returned Johanna gently.

"Heaven forbid that you should!"

"I am glad that she has been," persisted Johanna.

"Why?"

"Why! Isn't it right? Didn't you wish it yourself?"

"It is nothing to you," muttered Mathius uncivilly.

"Not when we were responsible for the accident?"

"I fancied you'd some crotchet of that sort in your mind," he said in the same tone. He glanced at Con-

stans, but Constans was leaning out of the carriage, looking longingly at the one in front, and trying to solve the riddle of its merriment. "One would suppose the Jonkheer was there at your invitation!"

"No. But had he not been there, what would have become of little Luce?"

"If he had not been there, would Luce have wandered away? Responsible! Freule Johanna, allow me to say that you are, or ought to be, too sensible to misplace sentiment. Put the blame on the right shoulders."

She looked gravely at him.

"One may sometimes be merciful, nevertheless," she said in a low voice.

"What is Madame van Regensdorf like? I have never met her," said Cootje.

"She is as hard and hollow as an empty nut," answered Mathius. "When I looked at the woman, with all her affectations and falsities, I felt half sorry for the boy. No doubt she thought it a great waste of time to come from Scheveningen. But you must understand that outwardly she was all civility."

"Ah, you are hard," said Johanna, looking at him. "I dare say he liked seeing her."

"He made no violent demonstrations of delight," answered the professor drily. "Freule Johanna, accept a little advice. Don't waste good compassion, and—no, you shall have the rest of my warning by-and-by."

"When you and I, Constans, are out of the way," said Madame van Weede good-humouredly.

"Precisely. There will be plenty of opportunities in the Beckhuizen woods."

After this, not much more was said; perhaps they all had a feeling that it was in vain for them to attempt to emulate the gaiety of the other carriage-load.

It seemed to Cootje that Johanna was on the alert, and that she meant this day's observations to serve a final purpose. Nevertheless, it was obvious that she would make them very quietly. At Rosendaal, for instance, where at little tables under the trees they had a simple luncheon of milk, bread and butter, and cheese, she kept herself in the background. The others amused themselves very well; it seemed to her that she quickly had fallen out of the circle. Afterwards they drove on to Felp, and from Felp, with its clean pretty houses, brilliant with flowers, roses, geraniums, and all the wealth of summer, and its beautiful trees, went across fields and skirting woods to Beckhuizen.

Beckhuizen is a favourite resort for the Arnheimers. Even in the hottest weather its shades are cool and moist. Deep down, by the house, a swift stream runs along, crossed by a somewhat cranky bridge, which it affords the children immense delight to run across. The great gravelled space before the house is shaded by large trees, under which plenty of chairs and tables are set out; here come happy families of children, bringing all sorts of cakes in *trommeltjes*, and provided with tea or milk by the house. The jugs travel backwards and forwards, the children dance and jump about, there is a pretty pastoral and simple air of easy enjoyment, which is delightful. Beyond, again, lie the great woods which are the real charm of the place. You may wander along sandy paths, and insensibly find yourself in deep recesses of delicious gloom, through which the sun shafts sparkle. Madame Marken, assisted by the town councillor, whom, in spite of his protestations, she had insisted upon constituting her aide-de-camp for this day, ordered dinner at a certain hour.

"You must all amuse yourselves till then," she said, looking round with a little wave of her hands, intended to cast off responsibility. "There are the woods, and here will be the dinner. We shall meet one another as we wander about."

"Who are the 'we' in her case?" asked Cootje wickedly of Mathius. "And pray what am I to do?"

"Will you allow me to show you the Beckhuizen woods?"

"No. I have not forgotten the snub you gave me in the carriage. You have something to say to Johanna. But where is Johanna?"

"She has vanished. She must have slipped away while we discussed dinner."

"And alone! All the others are here," said Madame van Weede in a disconsolate tone.

"Yes, alone," said Mathius.

Like Cootje, his eye had immediately sought for Captain Wrangel, but he was there, walking on in front with Hilvardine and Constans. Whatever their thoughts may have been they were silent for a few minutes, then Cootje said gravely—

"There is something I should like to ask you."

"I need not make a fine speech in answer to that remark. I am only glad to be treated as a friend."

"This is treating you very distinctively as a friend."

"All the better."

"What is Captain Wrangel about?"

Mathius looked grave.

"Ah," he said, "but all the friendship in the world will not give one the faculty of second-sight."

"Then you, too, are puzzled?"

"Completely. You must remember that I am not

very well up in the facts. Madame Marken scatters them bountifully before her hearers, but — those she bestows are of her own selection.”

Madame van Weede paused before answering. At last she said—

“Since all the town knows or thinks it knows the facts, there can be no disloyalty in discussing them with you. Besides, I must tell you, that Johanna is not a person to talk them over even with me; she is very reserved as to her own feelings. I know little more than the rest of you.”

“You are guarding yourself, or her, carefully,” said Mathius smiling. “Never mind. Tell me as much or as little as you like.”

“And you cannot be much interested.”

“Excuse me. I have not known her long, but I have the greatest esteem for the Freule Johanna.”

“Well, then, three years ago—Oh, I can’t tell you in this set way! Ask me what questions you like.”

“Three years ago—I suppose that means the time when Captain Wrangel went away. Were they engaged then?”

“No. He was too poor, and Johanna has no fortune to speak of. But there was, I am sure, an understanding.”

“Then he came home, and it was at an end?”

Cootje looked gravely at him.

“Ah, if that had been all, it would have been simple. I must tell you this. He wrote at once; he had his promotion, and the understanding was turned into an engagement.”

“Before they met?”

“Yes, before they met. And they didn’t meet for three months. Madame Steen died just then, and Johanna had a foolish notion that it was unfeeling for

her to think about anything that was not dismal, and Captain Wrangel had duty. I don't blame him so far, I blame Johanna. People delight in flinging away their happiness."

"If you blame her, that doesn't make you less sorry," said Mathius kindly; and, indeed, Cootje's voice was trembling. She recovered herself, however, immediately.

"Don't you know that women have an aggravating way of seeing and saying how a trouble might have been averted?" she said, with a laugh. "Of course, I should have been wiser."

"Naturally. Well?"

"Well, at the end of the three months he came. Johanna had just had time to find out all the difficulties of the Steen household, and to believe herself indispensable. I dare say you can guess some of them?" She gave him a quick glance as she spoke; but his face was inscrutable. "Never mind, they don't much matter," she went on hastily. "At any rate, Captain Wrangel came on the top of them."

"Did she break off the engagement?" the Professor asked.

Cootje hesitated. "I am sure she did not break it off, I am sure that was not what she wished; but she said they must wait."

Mathius marched on with his eyes on the ground.

"Is he waiting?" Madame van Weede asked presently in a low voice.

But she got no answer. To tell the truth, he was not thinking of either Johanna or Captain Wrangel. Presently, however, he put another question, perhaps because he saw she was expecting it.

"Did he promise to wait?"

"I believe not," said Cootje. "I believe he was

angry. But he called himself her lover. If he does not any longer care for her, what does he mean by coming here, and torturing her?"

Mathius was still silent; but she had a feeling that his silence was full of meaning, so that words could not have given her a stronger impression of sympathy. It was, however, Hilvardine who was filling his thoughts. Clara had been in the habit of talking to him about her eldest child. There was never any disguising her faults, for she had a way of flinging them broadly in your face; at the same time, the mother trusted her, trusted a certain generosity, frankness, warm-heartedness. Perhaps she valued these at more than they were worth; at any rate, she thought they would serve as props, and she had succeeded in imbuing Mathius with the same belief. When he came back he found yet another exceedingly attractive addition to the list of Hilvardine's good qualities—she had grown beautiful. Even against his judgment he had felt the charm; in fact, he always felt it when he looked at her. And in all he heard of her conduct and of the entanglement with Willem van Regensdorf, he thought he recognized the old Hilvardine, daring, defiant of opinions, going her own wilful way, yet generous, frank, warm-hearted. She was a great deal in his thoughts, and that with a young man means a drift in one direction; yet in spite of this Mathius was capable of a generous line of action; he would have pulled Van Regensdorf upwards and tried to make him worthy of Hilvardine if he could. It must be confessed he had a sorry subject for his chivalrous attempt, but grieved though he might have been, he would have found no fault with the girl if she had clung to him.

This was different.

To lend herself to another man's fickleness; to be the

means of cutting Johanna to the heart; to be ready, at a moment's notice, to fling aside the lover for whom she had professed so much fidelity,—all was contrary to his first estimate of her character. He did not blind himself to its falling off, it seemed to him infinitely blamable. There was a great deal which he could have forgiven, which he did forgive in her; but there are certain things which certain men cannot pardon. It appeared as if the unfortunate Hilvardine had just hit upon this combination. She was doing her best on this very day to make it more portentous, she was bent upon making Mathius understand that she cared nothing in reality for Van Regensdorf. It was this idea which filled her mind, so that she heard little of what Arent was saying, while he convinced himself he was making an impression.

It was not that his conscience did not occasionally prick him with regard to Johanna; but he had managed to irritate the soreness he really felt until he assured himself that her conduct had been so cold and heartless as to be unpardonable. Certainly Johanna's clear eyes had nothing cold or heartless in their depths, but as he would not look at them he lost any message they might have conveyed. When he saw her that day he was vexed; her presence piqued him to show how well he could do without her, and Hilvardine, though slightly *distracte*, was charming.

They wandered through the wood, sometimes near the town councillor and Madame Marken, sometimes with Constans at hand. Under their feet ran short tough grass or yellow patches of sand, across which contorted roots of trees thrust themselves, and on which the sunshine struck golden. These golden gleams, indeed, were flashing all over the wood and giving a singular brilliancy to its depths, for many of the trees were pines,

with ruddy stems which caught the light, and contrasted admirably with the naked grey of the smooth beeches. To complete the charm of the wood, a tiny stream, perhaps some vagrant runaway from the brook which flowed by the house, had cut a little channel for itself beneath the trees, and ran in and out with leisurely joy of life and delight in the pretty fringes on its banks.

CHAPTER XIII.

“Take this sorrow to thy heart, and make it a part of thee, and it shall nourish thee till thou art strong again.”

“COME and sit down,” Arent was saying. “It is a shame to waste the opportunities of all these twisted roots. Besides, it is too hot for walking about. Your father and Madame Marken have come to an anchor just beyond there, and I am sure you must be tired.”

“You have a number of excellent reasons, but I am never tired!” said Hilvardine brilliantly.

She consented, however, to take a few moments’ repose on the root of a tree which projected invitingly in the form of an armchair; for she was desirous of making observations upon the other members of the party: still more did she want to say a few words to the professor. Nemesis was present already, for she felt sure that Johanna, Cootje, and Mathius were enjoying themselves together, and with what satisfaction would she not have made over her companion to his rightful owner! But she thought very little about Captain Wrangel; she would have been immensely amazed to hear how her conduct appeared to others. For the moment she had wanted to revenge herself on Johanna; then, like some other women,

it was almost irresistible to her to fascinate where she felt she could; lastly, came a stronger motive than either—the wish to show Mathius that Van Regensdorf was not to her all that he imagined. This wish made the other's admiration really valuable, in spite of her impatience at his slow, deliberate ways. When no one was present, she became restless and absent, and a man with less vanity might have read that her thoughts were elsewhere, but he could not at all follow her changeful rapidity of mood. He had been first impressed by seeing the children clinging to her: a pretty picture, but incomplete, as pictures may be; it appeared to him that she must prefer Luce and Hendrik to all other subjects for conversation.

"I am afraid they will be very dull without you at home to-day, poor little things! How much they would have liked to have come here! This is just the place for children."

"Exactly," said Hilvardine, hiding a yawn.

"I suppose even your advocacy would not induce your father to bring them?"

"Oh, they are better at home."

"Still, I am sure you begged hard for them. Heer Steen must be very firm."

"He leaves all that to Aunt Johanna. Where is she, I wonder?" said the girl, looking between the pine stems. Suddenly she turned upon him. "Captain Wrangel, why don't you go and look for her?"

A dark red flash spread slowly over his face.

"Why should I?"

"Why?" she repeated, staring.

"There is nothing now between us."

"Nothing!"

"Nothing."

The girl still stared at him: she was extremely startled. She had not realized that matters had drifted to this wreck. With the almost unconscious egotism of youth and beauty, she had imagined it by no means remarkable that Captain Wrangel should find pleasure in her society; she was not sorry that Johanna should suffer for a time. But she had thought of the rift as something so curable that she could always accomplish the mending. Something dogged and obstinate in Captain Wrangel's manner filled her with dismay. She said in a faltering voice—

“But—but—there must have been some mistake.”

“A mistake? Well, yes—perhaps. And we don't want to perpetuate it?”

“Do you mean that you are not going to marry?” persisted Hilvardine, recovering herself.

“Not Freule Steen—not Freule Johanna Steen,” he said, carefully correcting himself.

“I don't understand what you are thinking of!” she exclaimed angrily. “After all these years, and when I thought you both cared so much! Some one ought to put it right—of course it might be put right! Why don't you go to her at once and explain?”

She was so vehement, so absorbed, that she did not notice the want of eagerness in his own manner. He said drily—

“Do you think these things can be worked together again, when once——”

“Yes, I do; of course I do!”

“You are young, and you are generous.”

“Generous? I?”

“With advice, at any rate. But suppose we prefer that things should remain as they are?”

"Oh," she said, turning her eyes away, "you are incomprehensible."

He bent forward and looked at her, saying in a changed voice—

"May it always be incomprehensible to you! It is good to believe that there are women in the world with whom love would be strong enough to carry them over obstacles. I am sure you have a warm heart, and that does not belong to every one. You would not cast off a lover. No man, if he has any self-respect, would endure such treatment."

He spoke with some agitation in his voice, and a hidden meaning which she did not or would not see. She reiterated her words sharply.

"It is a mistake—a great mistake. And you will take no trouble to set it right."

"Would it be wise?"

"Oh, wise! Do you think only of standing on your dignity?"

This touched him. He reddened.

"One may secure something out of the wreck."

"You have had your own way too long," she went on, striking out blindly right and left. "You are too much accustomed to give peremptory orders and have them carried out that moment. You should not expect everything to fall out exactly as you wish."

Perhaps she hoped to irritate him; but he was astonishingly meek.

"I dare say you are right; and if that is my character, it would unfit me for going along with one whose nature is too much like my own—wouldn't it? A vessel can't stand two captains. Or perhaps I'm a cranky old sea boat which needs particular steering. Anyhow, I know I want somebody whose heart would be in it."

Saying this he allowed his voice to fall, and looked searchingly at her. Her only feeling was one of impatience with herself and with him; she recognized a mistake if she recognized nothing deeper, and would have gladly brought these two together again. Sharp words trembled on her tongue, and she snapped into minute pieces a poor little pine twig she had picked up, but she kept herself from more than saying impatiently, "Oh, her heart would have been in it."

"I think not," said the sailor, frowning. "Remember, you agreed with me that she might have been spared from your home."

"Did I say so?" said Hilvardine, with a sinking heart.

"Yes. Besides, I saw."

"You should have shut your eyes."

"Till it was too late? No."

He was a man who clung to an idea like a limpet to a rock. And he had got his head turned. He thought very often of Johanna; he could not tell what his feelings were about—they seemed chiefly to consist of anger, which, perhaps, proved he was not so indifferent as he professed to be. And, almost in spite of himself, he was attracted by Hilvardine's beauty, besides crediting her with all sorts of ideal qualities. She began to be seriously provoked with him; and as for his feelings she did not trouble herself much about them, thinking them absurd.

"It is really ridiculous if neither of you know your own minds. Other people can't help you," she said pettishly. "You are building a wall on purpose to shut out your own happiness."

"Unless I have found out where my real happiness lies," he answered, bending forward and taking her hand in his.

The next moment she jumped up.

“What can my father and Madame Marken be talking about all this time?”

“Never mind them. They are quite contented. Don’t disturb them.”

“Disturb them?” she repeated, lifting her eyebrows.

She began to stroll towards the two distant figures, but really was taken up with trying to catch a glimpse of the others between the tall tree stems. She saw nothing; and yet Johanna was not far off.

Johanna had come, as we have seen, unwillingly, yet Cootje’s words had struck her as both friendly and sensible. In spite of the pain, it would be well, she confessed, to get a clear understanding of her position, to know whether Arent’s was only the anger of love, or the coldness of change. The two were so different!—to one she felt as if she would gladly humble herself, the other, alas! would be the end of all things; yet if it existed she would have to accept it, to meet it as best she could. Before she came she prayed a great deal for Arent and for herself. She had no bitter feelings to overcome, her love was as pure and tender as a good woman’s love can be. She prayed, not for the encompassment of her own happiness, but that he might have what was best for him; she was ready to stand aside if by so doing she could advance his well-being one jot.

But she may be forgiven if sore doubts rose in her heart when she thought she perceived what were his own ideas of well-being; she found it difficult to efface herself for Hilvardine. To begin with, she read the girl better than he read her; she was quite certain that no thought of love for him was in her heart; she believed the mainspring of her conduct to be a mischievous desire to thwart her. Nevertheless, let what would happen, Johanna felt she owed this much to her-

self, that she should definitely understand in what position she was placed; and it was for this that she had faced the pain of the day, and kept her judgment on the alert. She saw that Arent's eyes followed Hilvardine, she knew—too well!—the pleased expression of his face when she talked to him. Of this last conversation, which to the most careless observer was instinct with strong feeling of some kind, Johanna, leaning against a tree, had been a spectator. At its close she felt as if the lingering questions of her heart, hardly to be called hope, were finally quenched.

With that there rose up in her the courageous spirit to which Cootje had appealed. There should be no more doubts, no more dreams. Suffering seems bearable when we feel these are disposed of; we bring up all our forces to one point, instead of letting them be scattered here and there wherever we feel our weakness, and by this means hope to make a pretty defence. She tried to reflect that Arent could not have been what she thought him; or was it, indeed, she who was changed? The more she reflected, however, the more completely she cleared herself of any shade of fickleness—the very word, applied to her knowledge of herself, appeared scarcely congruous; and she had a just mind even when turned upon her own actions and character. It was he, then, who had been fickle. Then she did her best to fling herself into his possible indignation at her farther trial of his constancy; but this was not easy, because she could only take her own possible feelings, should such a proposition have been made to her, as her guide, and they were capable of nothing but assurances that waiting could not have affected love. In his case, however, it or something else had affected it. She could only suppose that with the first shock of disappointment

came hard thoughts of her, and that Hilvardine had unconsciously chosen that moment to step into his sight. The rest had been also unconscious, and it had been still more effectual.

But Johanna was capable of resolution. There in the quiet wood she accepted Arent's choice as final. Henceforth, whatever with him might veer and vary, no change would draw her back to him. She loved him still; but when Hilvardine told him he was building up a wall between himself and his happiness, it was true, so far, that if he ever came again to think his happiness lay in her hands, he had shut her out from his life for what men call—for ever.

After Arent and Hilvardine had moved away, she remained motionless for some time, staring at the ground. It was only by slow degrees that colour came back to her cheeks and power to her limbs. The first step she took, she had a strange dizzy tottering feeling, at which she vaguely wondered; but presently her healthy organization asserted itself, and she moved more strongly. She was then conscious of hearing herself called by name, and, looking up, saw Constans hastening towards her across the broken sandy ground.

"Aunt Johanna, Aunt Johanna!" she cried, "where have you been? Dinner is ready, and all the others are there. Papa thought you had gone off for some long walk; but I was sure you would not have left the woods, because, you see, it was to stay in the woods, where it is so nice and shady, that we came. Don't you wish we had some place like this near us at home?"

Johanna looked oddly at her, and gave a little shiver.

"Oh no, no!" she said under her breath quickly.

Constans opened her eyes.

“Did you say no? Ah, I suppose you think that if we had these woods we should waste a great deal of time in them. And, after all, I should be sorry not to have the canals. But, then, at Haarlem and the Hague they have both. If we had them I suppose we should not care about them so much—should we? There is the house, and there is Madame van Weede. How beautifully she dresses! Still, I do think nobody can look better than Hilvardine when she is pleased. She looks very well to-day. I wonder if they will be so gay when we go home by-and-by? I thought, if papa did not like it, perhaps he would be glad to change places with me, they sounded so amusing!”

Johanna could not have told much more about the day. She talked, ate, and drank mechanically; but daily life is to a certain degree mechanical, and it all passed as unremarkably as if she had brought the best efforts of her mind to bear upon her actions. She had ceased to observe—willingly. Every now and then something struck her with a dull pain—that was all. It might, however, have been worse for her had not others been on the watch to protect her. These were Cootje and the professor. Johanna never knew that she owed them anything; but they warded off several pricks, especially from Madame Marken, who, if not malignant, was attached to experiments which sometimes became torture to the subjects. They dined in a room on the ground floor, and through the open window could look out at the shady trees, and the happy children who played beneath them. Shouts of laughter came in, so that Constans could hardly help running out to know what it was all about. Poor Constans, who had a heavy longing for amusement, did not have her way as to an alteration in the carriages.

"We will go as we came; we did very well," answered Madame Marken; "unless anybody wishes to change?"

Then she looked hard at Captain Wrangel with her small twinkling eyes. Johanna was near him. Hilvardine, who would have preferred a readjustment, happened to have been addressed by Madame van Weede.

Arent said with determination, "So far as I am concerned, nothing can suit me better than the order in which we came."

So they drove in the sweet summer twilight, through the rich country laden with crops. Everything spoke of well-being and fat contentment. The corn stood breast high, the houses were embowered in flowers and long grass. Johanna, with hands lying crossed in her lap, sat looking out at them all, but seeing nothing except that other dream-house which had once belonged to the future, and now, like a ghost, had slipped back to the past.

CHAPTER XIV.

“Yea! thou soft, thou sober, sage, and venerable liquid—thou female tongue-running, smile-smoothing, heart-opening, wink-tippling cordial, to whose glorious insipidity I owe the happiest moment of my life, let me fall prostrate.”

WHEN they reached the station Madame van Weede's carriage was waiting; it had been arranged that she should drive Johanna and her nieces home. Captain Wrangel had gone on to Amsterdam; the professor walked off; and the town councillor was left to accompany Madame Marken. Johanna would have given up her place to that lady, but Cootje prevented her.

“My dear,” she said wickedly, “don't stand in the way of your brother's little distraction.”

“I don't think he would choose that distraction,” Johanna answered.

“Don't venture to think about other people,” said Cootje, laughing. “Here is the carriage, please get in. My father has only one weakness—his horses. Even I dare not keep them waiting.”

Frans Steen at first felt annoyed at his position; he fancied his acquaintances wore an air of hilarity when they beheld him walking through the streets with a lady; in reality the person most entertained by his discomfort was Madame Marken. She glanced at him now and then with an amused smile, but this did not prevent her from skilfully placing him at his ease. By the time they had threaded the streets and bridges, and passed under the beautiful cathedral tower, uplifting itself in grave solitude against the luminous sky, and reached Madame Marken's house, he had forgotten that there was anything

anomalous in his position, and did not resist her invitation to come in and take a cup of tea.

"Though Johanna and the children will be waiting for me," he said. His manner had in it a touch of helpless hesitation.

"They will not wait long, they will soon give you up. Besides, Heer Steen, consider the charity of the act! After a day spent as this has been, can't you conceive that it is a little hard to creep back into one's lonely shell?"

"Ah, dear lady," said the town councillor quite warmly, "if any one understood that loneliness, it should be I."

"Oh, I know that perfectly. If I were not sure that you would comprehend, I should not have the courage to allude to my own feelings. Before the world one makes an effort to appear gay. It is at a great cost, but one does one's best. I believe people do me the honour to say that I am never dull."

Evidently this astonished him. He looked at her and exclaimed, "Really?"

"But it is only with more intimate friends that one can indulge the luxury of allowing one's real inner self to appear. So you must forgive me if I take advantage of your kindness. I call it really good of you to be so friendly to-night," she added, settling herself comfortably with her blue china before her, the *theestoof* by her side, and the inevitable footstool under her feet. Then she abruptly changed the subject, so as to spare him the awkwardness of disclaiming a favour. "What an excellent sister you have in Johanna."

"Oh, excellent!"

"She seems to me to manage without any rubs."

"Perhaps hardly that. That could not be expected."

"You mean as to Hilvardine? Well, Hilvardine is a

little difficult. Do you know I have a theory as to Hilvardine?"

"What is it?"

"Ah, that I cannot tell you. It is not likely that I shall ever have an opportunity of putting it into practice."

She kept her eyes on the ground as she said this, but she could not resist stealing a little glance at him to see how he took it. It appeared to her that he was interested.

"I wish I could hear. But if you will not indulge me, you might talk to Johanna."

"Johanna might not understand me so well as you do."

It certainly did appear to Heer Steen that he understood her very well; that a true sympathy existed between them. His heart had not by the least movement wavered from Clara; but all that day he had had the satisfaction of feeling that some one appreciated his grief; sometimes he told himself that those at home failed in this respect. He looked gratefully at Madame Marken, the more so, perhaps, because his tea was so strong and so sweet.

"It will be a sad trouble for you when Johanna marries," she continued presently.

"Oh, that will not be yet," he said quickly.

"No? Then it is true, that things are at an end between her and Captain Wrangel? I fancied it seemed like it to-day."

"I hardly know. Johanna does not say much," said the town councillor, looking at her uneasily.

"No one seems to know!" said Madame Marken, with a sharp little laugh, which she checked.

"Certainly I pointed out to her that she could not well be spared at present. It was impossible; any one would see that it was impossible. But you will under-

stand that I had no thought of interfering with her happiness. I merely begged her to wait. That, surely, was not much."

"You think not?" said Madame Marken drily. "I wonder what Captain Wrangel thinks?"

"If he could not make such a small concession, Johanna is well rid of him." He spoke with warmth.

Madame Marken filled another cup of tea, and again dropped in a generous measure of sugar.

"Perhaps so," she said slowly; "probably so, in fact. But, mijnheer, even should this be at an end, you must expect something else to appear soon on the horizon. Johanna is young and attractive."

"Do you think so?" Evidently he was surprised. "She is a good girl."

"Oh, a very good girl," Madame Marken returned, more lightly. "I have the greatest regard for her, in spite of her looking upon me as a terrible person."

"Impossible!"

"Ask her."

"If she fails to appreciate you, you must put it down to her limited knowledge of the world. She has seen so little."

"Upon my word, I don't know if that is a compliment or a very severe cut," replied Madame Marken, looking oddly at him. But the next moment she added, with a laugh, "Oh, of course, I understand that it is something wanting in her, not me. We have already agreed we don't meet with the appreciation we deserve. Nevertheless, I like Johanna. She is so true and so single-minded, she does one good. I should be glad to see her happily settled."

"In good time, in good time. Women are always in a hurry," said the town councillor testily.

"It is fortunate for us that men keep the balance— isn't it? Well, I can enter into your feelings; indeed, I can! Let me give you another cup of tea. You dread the breaking up of a happy home."

"Not happy. It can never more be happy," he said emphatically. "I assure you that sometimes when I listen to their voices, and reflect that one—the dearest—I shall never hear again, I feel as if I must jump up and rush out. Then they wonder I don't join them, don't laugh. Laugh! I believe I am almost mad at such times."

"My poor friend!" Madame Marken was saying softly.

"And then they are all so young; they can talk and forget, and I—— A great gulf seems to separate us."

"When you feel like that, come here, and talk of Clara. I am not young. I, too, have suffered. I can sympathize. Promise me!"

She looked earnestly at him, and he felt a thrill of gratitude touch his heart.

"Ah, you don't know what a refuge you offer," he said in a low voice. "But I have no right to burden you with my miseries."

"Now you hurt me. If you talk in that way, I shall no longer believe that you look upon me as your friend."

He sighed, and glanced round the little room, and, less openly, at Madame Marken, who was deftly washing her china. He might be forgiven if it appeared to him indeed as a haven of rest, for his own home had conflicting wills at work within it—children who had been spoilt, Hilvardine antagonistic; Johanna's bright and orderly spirit could not always avoid clash and turmoil. Besides, of late Johanna had had to fight against the maiming attacks of indifference, and of this her brother had an injured consciousness, though he could not have

laid his finger upon any particular change. Grief often leaves a man more selfish than it finds him. The hushed time, when others make him their first thought and his claims are acknowledged to be paramount, has a certain agreeability in spite of sorrow, and he resents the necessary shifting of this central position. External sympathy steps in with generous effect at this moment; it is the secret of many impressions which surprise us. The town councillor had of late received little outward sympathy, so that Madame Marken's seemed to possess a peculiarly balmy flavour, and when he took his departure she felt that he promised himself more of the same. She watched him out of the door, and then fell into a long low fit of laughter.

"What fools these men are!" she reflected. "And yet were I to speak to one of Frans Steen's colleagues, he would assure me that he had an excellent head for business, and, was one of the props of the town. A prop! Bless him, one that it takes very little talking to shake! But isn't it marvellous to see how the same treatment affects them all? A little flattery, a judicious stir of vanity, an appeal to sympathy, and the thing is done. I vow there is a degree of dulness about the monotony of the process. Women are not nearly so simple; they require a more complicated process, and here and there one finds a few exceptions among the men, I doubt whether Professor Mathius would be so easily affected. But Captain Wrangel, oh, Captain Wrangel! Johanna has shown such want of ingenuity in her treatment!—it does not matter, to be sure, since she is far too good for him. Were it not for that I would have taken the affair in hand myself, particularly as, if ever I make up my mind to become Madame Steen, Johanna will not remain

in the house. I should be glad to have her, but she would not stay; she would be more difficult to pacify than Hilvardine, and yet—there, again, what a mistake!—it would be actual deliverance for her. Seven children, seven children, and Hilvardine at the head—a serious consideration for one woman, or would be if a more serious consideration did not remain behind. But if I can make up my mind to Frans Steen, the seven children will not affect me; I should not be bad to them, and they might do worse. Humph! Well, there is plenty of time for consideration; the winter lies before us, and I have not the smallest intention of allowing matters to be precipitated. If this summer had not been so hot I should never have thought of it. But it is miserable work to be so poor and to see your friends going off to amuse themselves, while you stay behind in this broiling town. I cannot go through that again. Only—heigh-ho!—how much I shall hear of Clara!”

CHAPTER XV.

“Their smiles and censures are to me the same;
I care not what they praise or what they blame.”

VAN REGENSDORF'S accident gave Hilvardine a breathing space, which she accepted in the way she accepted other things, daringly, shutting her eyes to future consequences. But though we shut our eyes, we may be just as conscious of the sword hanging over us. His silence did not reassure her. She constantly asked herself what he would do. The last thing she looked for was his giving her up without a struggle; she knew him too well to expect that—was even aware that probably he meant to hold her the closer. Nor was she callous; she was frightened. But for all that, she faced her fear daringly.

“Broken arms, however, get mended in time, though Van Regensdorf's own imprudence had more than once flung him back. At last he wrote to Hilvardine, using exactly the same tone as in former days, and expatiating on the happiness of seeing her again. When they did meet, she was with Johanna, just about to enter a shop; Van Regensdorf was coming across a bridge a few yards away. He made no attempt to join them, contenting himself with a sweeping bow. She was not, however, deceived by this reticence; it appeared to her alarmingly significant. At the same time, in a certain sense, the first meeting was over, and that was something. Like others who feel themselves in sorry plight, to her time seemed everything; there was no knowing what might not turn up.

Nothing turned up—for a while. Days and weeks went by. The professor was a good deal at the house. He gave no reason for coming, and showed no predilection when there, but by little and little Hilvardine grew to feel that all the sunshine of the day lay in his presence, and to feel it so strongly that she could not but suppose that he felt the same. She was certain that he admired her: to admire is to like, to like is to love—so ran the girl's logic. She watched Johanna eagerly, owing to a little unacknowledged uneasiness; but Johanna went her quiet way, giving no sign of special interest, liking Mathius cordially, treating him as a friend, and grateful for his friendship, which, indeed, made a green spot in her life. His manner with her was as quiet as her own; indeed, he seemed rather to belong to the family than to seek to attach himself to any one in particular. They had all grown to depend upon him, to treat him like a good elder brother, and apparently he desired nothing better. There was one other thing which made life easier at this time to Johanna. Arent was absent—called away on duty, and not likely to return before winter. The feeling of loneliness which at first, and in spite of all, was oppressive, she found less burdensome than the constant wearing expectation of meeting him which had for some time kept her heart over-strained. There was a quiet heroism about Johanna, and no one suffered for her sorrow.

Madame Marken and Hilvardine were very good friends. That was a little strange, but the sudden attraction developed by Madame Marken towards the town councillor himself was stranger; Johanna fancied he spent even more time with her than he acknowledged to his family. Hilvardine's fancy might be a whim or an im-

pulse of contradiction; as for Frans, she supposed that he liked to talk about himself and his own sorrowful feelings, and that it was this luxury which his neighbour was offering. She would not go on to surmise why she offered it, but it gave her an uneasy feeling.

One autumn morning she was in the upstairs sitting-room, with the baby, little Maria, on her knee. Luce and Hendrik were repeating a spelling-lesson. Hilvardine, having wandered inconsequently in and out of the room to the detriment of the spelling, sat down at last to the piano. The post arrived, and Betje brought a letter, and laid it on the table. Johanna, taking it up, felt sure that the writing was Van Regendorf's.

"It is for you, Hilvardine," she said gravely.

The girl read it without confusion and without comment, went back to the piano, and finished her piece. At luncheon she announced that she should take Luce and Hendrik out.

"I cannot spare them," said Johanna, flushing.

"Then, I will go by myself," Hilvardine answered unconcernedly.

"Your father does not like you to go alone."

"Doesn't he? In that case you had better let me have the children."

"Will you not come with me?" said Johanna, with earnestness. "We will walk anywhere you like."

"Not to-day, thank you."

What was Johanna to do? She spoke to Frans, who told her with some impatience that Madame Marken did not think Hilvardine would do anything really foolish. It was better to trust her.

"Will you tell her so? I think also it would be well to put her on trust."

"Really, Johanna, I have neither leisure nor heart for

these eternal preachings! I leave it all in your hands. Manage her yourself."

"But I am not her father!" exclaimed the other girl, quickly. "Then, you wish her to have the children?"

"*I* wish! Of course, I don't wish her to do anything undesirable; certainly not. I do think it very strange that all these decisions should be thrust upon me when you know how much I dislike them. Madame Marken says——"

"Madame Marken!" repeated Johanna impatiently. He took offence in a moment.

"Madame Marken. Yes, Madame Marken, whose judgment is admirable." He added emphatically, "I would suggest your being more guided by her advice. I don't blame you, but you are certainly neither very old nor very experienced."

"No, indeed!" she exclaimed, with quick and frank acknowledgment; "that is why I am obliged to fall back on your authority, dear Frans. You must not begrudge it to me, nor send me to Madame Marken or any other stranger. No one will do but yourself."

She spoke playfully, though she felt hurt to her heart. And he retorted querulously—

"I do not look upon Madame Marken as a stranger. I wish you would throw yourself more sympathetically into my interests."

She looked blankly at him, turned away, and came back.

"In spite of what you say, I must understand what I have to do in the present affair. Is Hilvardine to go?"

"Unless you can prevent it. I dare say it is all a mistake. There may be no question of her meeting that young fellow."

She went away upon this, called Hilvardine, and told

her that her father wished the children to go with her. She felt a sinking sense of her own insufficiency as she spoke; it appeared to her that she had resigned her own happiness for a shadowy duty. Only the baby seemed to need her, the little golden-haired Maria, who capered and kicked for joy whenever she saw Johanna. With her in her arms, some sweet consolation came into her life. The professor that day found her on a footstool with the child, and paused at the door to watch a picture which appeals to most men's hearts. She blushed and struggled to her feet.

"You come in the midst of a great game of play; you must excuse us," she said, laughing.

"How she grows!" said Mathius.

"Does she not? And she has two teeth already. Only think of that at eight months old!"

"Is it very wonderful?" asked Mathius, humbly. "I should have thought she might have had a great many more."

"At eight months? Professor Mathius, I did not know men were quite so ignorant! You will be supposing next that she can talk."

"No, no; I know better than that. I know they always walk long before they talk."

She laughed at this assumption of knowledge so heartily that he felt a magnanimous joy in his own gross ignorance. She had a very pleasant laugh, and it was not often nowadays that it was heard.

"I shall not commit myself any further. Let us turn the subject. Are you alone in the house?"

"Yes; Madame van Alphen's mother-in-law — the *douairière*—fixed to-day for calling. She is an old lady, and her visits are state ceremonies."

"Did I see Hilvardine and the children near the Oudegracht?"

"Probably. They are together."

"I saw young Van Regensdorf afterwards making for the same direction," said the professor, hesitatingly.

"I am sorry," said Johanna, simply. She was desirous to save Hilvardine as much as she could. Mathius looked on the ground; he was evidently ill at ease. "You have something you wish to tell me?" she went on, struck by his face.

"I do not know that I can do harm or good by saying it. But the mother of one of the students told me that, from something he let drop, she fancies he is enraged by her change of treatment."

"That is nothing," said Johanna quietly.

"It is a good thing, if you and she will only look at it in that light," he said, turning quickly towards her. "The worst that he can do may be made harmless, if faced bravely."

"Hilvardine is brave," Johanna replied, after a moment's thought. He was silent, and she continued—"I am helpless in the matter. What do you suppose he will do next?"

"He is capable, apparently, of threatening to hand about her letters," said Mathius, his face darkening.

"Perhaps not of doing it."

"Perhaps not. I do not know. At any rate, you must impress upon her that if—if she wishes to have done with the affair (I own I should have respected her more if she had stuck to it) she must not allow herself to be bullied or terrified. Let him do his worst."

Johanna was apparently struck by the parenthesis in his speech.

"You would have respected her more if she had stuck to it?" she repeated, in astonishment.

Mathius grew red. "Yes," he said. And he added, "It would have proved she had a heart."

"Oh, she has a heart—for one who knows the right way of getting at it," said Johanna, with a sigh. "However, I will impress upon her what you say, if I can. I do not understand Hilvardine, and so I can help her very little; she thinks I interfere. Very likely I was not sufficiently careful when first I came. Never mind that now. The only thing is, as you say, to induce her to face this exposure, painful as it will be."

"Exactly. No half-measures. You women are so fond of them," he said, with a smile.

It was late in the afternoon before the three came in. The day was cold, and the children tired and cross, in spite of *hopfjes* which Hilvardine had taken for them. Hilvardine herself looked pale, and she was very silent through dinner. Afterwards the town councillor, who had not recovered his temper, went out he did not say where, but his sister suspected it was to seek sympathy from Madame Marken. She would not allow herself to think of what this meant; it seemed to her disloyalty to harbour even the vagrant suspicions which every now and then darted across her mind, whether she would or no. Besides, at this moment she was obliged to keep her thoughts for Hilvardine's concerns; she was very anxious that no irritation or want of judgment on her part should stand in the way. As for the professor, she hardly knew whether to mention his name or not. She resolved to be guided by circumstances. There was an hour when Constans or Johanna always went into the nursery to see that all was well there.

This evening Johanna asked her niece to go; it was the moment on which she had calculated. A prevision of the fact may have struck Hilvardine, and Johanna felt it was not propitious when she got up as if to follow her sister.

"The stove has been over-heated," she said, by way of excuse.

"We will move further from it," said Johanna. "Do you mind waiting a few minutes?"

"That depends," said the girl. But she waited, though she would not sit down.

"I am afraid you will always dislike anything I have to say on one subject. Even if you do, will you listen, or will you let me ask you whether I cannot help you a little? Hilvardine, indeed I would do so with all my heart."

"Thank you, I want no help," said Hilvardine proudly.

"Are you sure? If your feelings have changed towards Heer van Regensdorf——"

"Thank you; I repeat that I can arrange my own affairs."

"You refuse to discuss them, or to accept advice?" said Johanna sadly. "Yet, dear Hilvardine, your position may be very difficult."

If she had looked up she might have noticed a slight spasm of pain strike across the girl's face. But she was looking on the ground, and the silence which followed seemed that of obstinacy. She went on slowly—

"Let me say only that all your friends——"

Hilvardine interrupted her bitterly—

"I do not wish to hear about my friends. Those who are my friends do not meddle; the others may hold what opinions of me they choose."

In spite of this outburst, she would have given worlds

to know whether Professor Mathius had talked of her, and what he had said; but not through Johanna. And Johanna became silent. She was afraid of doing more harm than good. She was not experienced enough to read behind the girl's words the heart's longing, or to know that she lingered and took up one book after another because she was dying to hear these despised opinions.

"Well," said Johanna, sadly, at last, "if you will have nothing to do with any of us, we cannot help you. I could not avoid knowing where you were going to-day, and if it had been to break everything off, I could have been glad that you went; but——"

"You do not understand," said Hilvardine impatiently.

"How can I, if you will place no confidence in me?"

The other did not answer; she went slowly away out of the room. The interview, indeed, had been one which filled her with anxiety, and assured her that Van Regensdorf had in no way relinquished his position. On the contrary, he had sworn more hotly than ever that he would never give her up; nor had he made the least secret of his intention to use all means to hold her, even against her will, pleading his own passion as excuse. He knew, he said, that her present attitude was the result of pressure from her friends; her own heart was not capable of such fickleness. He made full use of his accident, caused by his devotion to her family. Her impressions of honour and dishonour got hopelessly entangled by his pleading, for the baseness which allowed him to threaten her with making her letters public to any who cared to read them, became, to a certain degree, extenuated in her eyes by the passionate protests that he was ready to be considered base and dishonourable, so that by all and any means he could keep her

as his own. Under these threats and these pleadings, which he used with some address, Hilvardine temporized. Mathius, when he was talking to Johanna of the dangers to the girl if she took such a course, did not for a moment realize that it was fear of his displeasure which was just now her worst adviser. If Willem could be kept from carrying out his threats for a time, she hoped that something would turn up. She remembered a hundred foolish and sentimental expressions in her letters, assurances that she would never love another, which it now seemed to her she must have been mad to have written, so completely had they faded out of her heart. But, read, they would have all the force of present reality. She felt as if she must gain possession of these letters; how, she did not know, but certainly not by defying Van Regensdorf, which was the only course really congenial to her character. Alas! across that straight and safer way stood the figure of Professor Mathius.

Van Regensdorf was cleverer than she, and read her thoughts with a smile. He was aware that she hoped to cajole him, and had a strong idea of who had supplanted him. He very willingly allowed her to believe that he might in time be persuaded into giving up the letters; even led her on with a hinted suggestion to that effect, at which she caught eagerly. He made her promise not to break off communications, with another promise on his part that in general he would be content with public recognition. If, however, at any time he required an interview, she engaged to allow him to have it.

As she walked home she reflected that all her heroic resolutions had come to absolute nothing. She could not plume herself upon having carried one single point victoriously. She sickened at the thought of the bonds

which were yet around her, and which she had not the courage to break. It was so strange to her that she should be wanting in courage that she could scarcely bear the knowledge; yet courage seemed impossible, because it meant, or so she thought, heaping scorn upon her own head. She was young enough to believe that every action of her own was imminent to the world, and noted in its great book, and before the dread of that judgment, the other greater one, with its eternal records of right and wrong, gave but weak warning.

Every day, then, she fell further away from Willem, but was more careful to avoid offending. When she met him—and he chose to force her to this oftener than she had hoped—she tried by all means to conciliate him; he meanwhile flattering her with half-promises about the letters. She was never without a hope that the next time she saw him he would make them over to her.

And meanwhile autumn and winter crept on, in the grey dress which sometimes clothes them in the Netherlands. The blue or pearly mists which soften and make tender all its vast expanse of flat distance took more solid and sombre form; fogs rose from the water, the canals were dreary in aspect, the trees wanted the gorgeous colouring of a dryer atmosphere, and their leaves drifted into dank heaps. Winter stole on with chill prognostications in the shadow which fell before. The gardens were emptied of their flowers; the sense of loss touched even what beauty remained with melancholy.

But with December frost brought more brightness, and Santa Claus excited the children into wild delight. It is not only the children who turn the sixth of December into a festival; the Dutch make it a great day for giving and receiving presents, and for a long while before the house is full of conspiracies, the domestic air thick with

secrets. On this particular day both Johanna and Hilvardine received presents, without being able certainly to say who was the giver of each. Johanna's was a finely bound copy of Thomas à Kempis; Hilvardine's a beautiful bouquet. Johanna wondered, blamed herself, yet wondered again, whether it had been sent by Arent; Hilvardine wondered, hoped, and finally decided that Mathius had provided the bouquet.

CHAPTER XVI.

“Shrilly the skater's iron rings.”

WINTER this year in the Netherlands advanced gradually, but severely. Except in the North, there is often much less of ice and snow than is popularly supposed in this country. The idea that it is a common occurrence for the people to skate all over the land is a delusion; as in England, severe winters are rather the exception than the rule. This year, however, the exception reigned; and after sharp premonitory pinches of frost, it came with a long spell in January, ushered in by an exceedingly heavy fall of snow. The canals were frozen to such an extent that traffic was seriously interfered with, and the ice-bound *trekschuyts* huddled together, their cabins roofed with snow like arctic huts, and their chimneys sending up steady columns of grey smoke. The world, indeed, was full of beautiful harmonies of white and grey; the sun shone, the frost sparkled, a general gaiety was abroad. It was a pleasant change from the raw, damp cold which sometimes strikes to the very bones in this land of waterways. Skating, of course, became the favourite amusement, but there were also

large sleighing parties. A *rendezvous* was given at some village, where a sort of indoor picnic was held, and as on these occasions, so long as a married lady is there to act as chaperon, a gentleman may invite a young lady to drive with him, there is a general relaxation of the sterner laws of etiquette. Naturally, the students are leading spirits at these picnics.

Johanna and Hilvardine were both skating one afternoon, when the professor, who was passionately fond of the exercise, scudded up to them.

"Are you going to the Schuylen's picnic?" he asked. Johanna shook her head; but Hilvardine, colouring a little, answered that she had accepted. She rarely mentioned her engagements to her aunt, and she knew, from some curt remarks made by Mathius, that he disapproved of her practice. He chose to ignore her now, addressing himself still to Johanna. "I hoped I might have had the pleasure of taking you in my sleigh. You have never yet gone with me."

"I should have liked it," said Johanna frankly, "but, you see, I am not asked. Will you take Hilvardine instead?"

"Perhaps she has already made her engagements," said Mathius, drily. As she was silent, he added, "If not, I shall be happy."

Hilvardine's heart beat with delight. "I am quite free," she said.

"In that case——" He finished his sentence with a bow. "The start, I believe, is to be at eleven. If this sharp cold continues you will require all your wraps, though I know the Freule Johanna thinks of every one's wants."

Hilvardine's happiness was too great for her to resent

this as she might otherwise have done; she even felt a little grateful to Johanna. But with her joy there was a background of alarm. Willem would certainly be at the picnic, and it was equally certain that he would not yield her without a struggle. She could only trust to the chapter of accidents, and meanwhile avoid a meeting with all her might. For this reason she kept close to Johanna. The professor skated with them for a time. People walked about on the ice, and chatted with more adventurous friends; others lined the banks. The scene was very bright and cheerful. All the delicate network of the trees which bordered the canal stood out in exquisite tracery against a soft grey sky; the sun gleamed redly; bright colours were dotted about. A frozen-out ferryman, who generally worked a brisk trade at the point where a couple of great windmills make a picturesque feature at an angle of the canal, stood looking disconsolately at his lost traffic, and wished with all his heart for a thaw. Here and there an impromptu party would be formed to go off to some village a few miles distant, the network of canals making this an easy matter.

Johanna, who had been talking to a young lady, suddenly looked up and gave an exclamation of pleasure. Cootje, her husband, and her father the burgomaster, were by her side.

"It was irresistible," Cootje explained. "At the Hague Bernhard and I are obliged to be on our best behaviour, so we have come down here to enjoy ourselves. Oh, you are nicer here, I assure you! I am trying to persuade Bernhard to make a little skating tour, but he is dreadfully lazy; he fusses as much about the things we should have to carry as if we were going to the North Sea. However, if only the ice will hold, I do not despair."

"No, you need seldom despair of having your own way," said Johanna, with a smile.

"*Par exemple*, do you know what I intend you all to do now, the professor, Hilvardine, and you, Johanna? You are to come back with us. There is plenty of time before dark, and you have no idea how beautiful it is upon the *trekvaart*. No, Johanna; you need not barricade yourself behind the children. Constans will look after them like a motherly hen. Come!"

"I suggest an improvement," said Heer van Oord. "Stay and dine with us. It is fine moonlight, and Bernhard and I will escort you back. If you have never skated by moonlight, let me assure you the sensation is worth experiencing."

"I am willing," said Mathius. "It is a free day with me."

Hilvardine was glad for two reasons—first, because the present pleasure was a delight; secondly, because it removed her fear of meeting Van Regensdorf. Constans was found, put under the charge of friends, and weighted with her message, and the others skated away together, Cootje and Johanna behind.

"Now tell me all you can," said the former, emphatically. "How goes it with everybody? What have you been doing? Look at me, Johanna. Well, you are better to look at than when last I saw you, and that is something. But your letters are unsatisfactory productions. Don't keep your next lover on that barren food for longer than you can help."

"Cootje!"

"Well?"

"I think you have grown the least little bit——"

"Vulgar? Oh, no, my dear; I am only unbending after my superfine Hague manners. Johanna!"

"Yes?"

"I am going to shock you terribly by my next suggestion."

"Don't suggest, then."

"Oh, how little you know me! Can you say that I ever in the least minded shocking you? But this is a little beyond."

"I am not going to gratify you by asking questions. Look at the cathedral tower; when did you see anything so beautiful?"

"Half an hour ago, my dear; for it was just this point of view which suggested the impression I am offering you. We stopped here to speak to Madame de Handyck when Heer Steen passed by."

"He had walked round from the Stadshuis to see the skating. He does not skate himself."

"Probably."

"Well, is that all?" said Johanna, impatiently.

"No; it is only half."

"Cootje, you are in your most teasing mood. What have you to say?"

"The other half of my impression was Madame Marken."

There was a dead silence; Johanna had her head turned away. The two friends skated swiftly along, under bridges, round corners. Cootje did not know what her speech would bring forth, but presently Johanna slackened speed.

"Do you think such a thing possible?" she said in a low anxious voice. Madame van Weede perceived at once that the idea was not absolutely new to her.

"Why not?" she answered.

"To me it seems simply incredible."

"That he should marry at all, or that he should marry Madame Marken?"

"Both, I believe," said Johanna, in the same tone.

"I don't know about Madame Marken. She is not the woman I can fancy choosing for a wife, but she may have her virtues. As to his marrying, my dear Johanna, you had better prepare yourself; it is certainly inevitable."

"This is January; Clara has not yet been dead a twelvemonth, and we are deciding on her successor," said Johanna bitterly. Madame van Weede was silent. Presently Johanna continued. "It is impossible! We must be doing him an injustice. He wants change of thought, and she can be very entertaining when it pleases her. What would become of Hilvardine?"

"It may be imaginary, as you say, but if it comes to pass, I don't think it would be an unmixed evil."

"Cootje!"

"No. She will not make a bad step-mother, you will see."

"Don't let us say any more," said Johanna, sighing. But she immediately added, "Do you suppose that Professor Mathius, or any one else, has thought of such a possibility?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"I think he would have told me." She said this ponderingly.

"He is intimate with Heer Steen, is he not?" asked Cootje, glancing at her.

"He has always been a good deal at the house. He is an excellent friend." And then she spoke of his offer to drive Hilvardine. "It is a relief to me," she went on, "because I am afraid of young Van Regensdorf becoming prominent again on such occasions. But Hilvardine seemed pleased."

"It is a pity you are not going yourself; you would have enjoyed the drive."

"Yes; and Professor Mathius was good enough to ask me first. But, you see, I am not invited. And, after all, Cootje, perhaps I ought not to leave home; perhaps I should not have come with you to-day. Of course, it is dull for Frans, and the children overpower him. He has not the knack of managing them."

"Perhaps, in fact, you ought not to think of yourself except in the light of duenna, housekeeper, governess, and nurse. At twenty-eight you certainly should have accepted those interesting *rôles* with all your heart. I am ashamed of your frivolity in skating——"

"Are you prepared to walk for half a mile?" interrupted Monsieur van Oord, coming back.

The conversation became general, and gained a great deal of gaiety; the invigorating air, the delight of exercise, put them all into good spirits, and sent forebodings into the background. Johanna had not laughed and chattered so freely for many a long day. There was a little quaintly humorous corner of her nature which she did not often turn towards inspection, but which on this day came forward, and the others were in a mood to second her. If there was nothing to get mirth out of, they laughed at its absence. Sometimes they walked, sometimes they skated; and the *trekvaart*, when they reached it, was thronged with happy parties as merry as themselves, who turned to look at Madame van Weede in her beautiful furs, and at Hilvardine's brilliant beauty, and smiled sympathetically at the sight. They were people from the village and houses near, and Hilvardine had no fear of meeting with Willem van Regensdorf among them. The professor looked with pleasure at Johanna's evident exhilaration. He set it down to Madame van Weede's presence, and would not interfere between the friends; generally, therefore, Hilvardine found him at her side.

Bernhard van Weede was a fine, tall young fellow, with a curly head, and an open, frank expression. He adored his wife, and was as completely under her orders as her father had been. It was well for Cootje that she had a good heart which nothing could spoil, for fortune had done its best.

To-day, at any rate, she was bent upon spoiling Johanna. Johanna was the centre, was petted, was *fêted*. The cook received orders to make her favourite pudding, the gardener to gather her particular flowers. Hilvardine opened her eyes at all this homage, which Johanna took with frankly expressed amusement. It was a change from her brother's house, where she was certainly not *fêted*.

"She shall have all I can give her," Cootje announced to the professor in the evening.

"She deserves it," he replied gravely.

"Ah, you begin to appreciate her," said Cootje.

It must be owned this was an indefensible attack, and so Mathius appeared to consider it.

"I?" he said, flushing. "I? Do you mean to say you ever doubted that I had a sincere admiration for the Freule Johanna?"

"Oh, sincere admiration!" repeated Cootje, with a little pout. "There is as ceremonious a sound about such an expression as if you had never emerged from the grand manners of the last century. Don't you think it necessary to ask her to dance a minuet?"

He was looking at her curiously; it seemed as if he were going to speak, when her husband came up.

"We are to start almost immediately. Mademoiselle Steen is anxious to return."

"And I am not to go? It is horrible!" said Cootje, taking his arm. "Marriage is a state of tyranny."

Yet she reflected a great deal on how Johanna might enter that state. She wanted to get her away from the Steen household, and she had a spiteful desire Captain Wrangel should see her valued by another. Johanna little thought, as they skimmed along over the white ice, what conspiracies were weaving about her in Cootje's fertile brain. She thought of little at this moment beyond delight in all things round her; and, indeed, it would have been difficult to have avoided falling under the influence of its subtle charm. The moon had not yet risen, but the sky was brilliant with stars, and the sky in the Netherlands seems more imposing and encircling than it does anywhere else in these latitudes. Near the horizon a faint mist gave the lower stars an air of supreme size and of tremulous glory; while Orion, with his sword and his belt and his dogs, strode boldly across the heavens. Such an illumination afforded as much light as was needed. But earthly lights were not wanting, and sparkled gaily out of windows and doors; even here and there upon the ice, where some prudent wayfarer had provided himself with a lantern. These little travelling glittering points, it must be owned, added an exceeding beauty of their own. Now the little party skated along a broad canal, on either side of which rose, in exquisite feathery masses, a darkness of trees. Again they were in one where nothing broke the flat and solemn stretch of horizon—except, perhaps, a windmill or two, flinging their gaunt arms towards the sky—where they met no other skaters, and hushed their voices, feeling something unearthly in the solitude, in the strange swiftness of their own movement, and in the ghostly whiteness under their feet. Presently they were in the world again, among frozen-up barges, adding their lights, many of them, to the picturesqueness of things, with houses

thickening: and then, dominant over the lower world, the great tower of the cathedral rising gravely and serenely towards the stars. Never, perhaps, before had it seemed so impressive, never had its message fallen more solemnly than now when all its details were shrouded from view, and only the up-springing and soaring lines carried the human hearts below irresistibly to heaven.

They were all silent, all to some extent under the serious influence of the night, though it naturally touched them in different degrees, from the burgomaster, who found his thoughts drawn, he knew not how, to the wife who long ago had passed into the silent land, and now seemed once again so near him that he could have fancied her at his side,—to Johanna, whose soul shook off all the trouble and fret of past days, and sang a glad hymn of praise for good which had been too much forgotten. They were all silent; but she had a feeling that Mathius, who was close to her, was sharing her thoughts. It seemed as if words were unnecessary, and that all was clear without them. Perhaps in the night, when the din of earth is hushed, finer perceptions than our ordinary work-a-day senses stir within us. At any rate, never before had she been so conscious of a thrill of sympathy which ran through her. When they had left the ice, and were walking through the familiar streets, where people were abroad, muffled up, and moving quickly, they seemed to have fallen into the commonplace world again; but presently, as they stood face to face with the great tower and advanced into its shadow, the deeper impressions came silently back and once more hushed their speech. The moon had by this time risen, and threw her clear light against and through the lantern at the top of the tower; but all the lower part was gravely shrouded in darkness, and only a little lamp under the

arch cast a feeble ray of light upon their way. Darkness, which thus swallowed up all the obtrusive details, gave also an air of mysterious vastness to the whole. To be alone under the stars with some great work is to receive an undying impression. No one spoke until they had emerged from the arches, and were crossing the open space lying between the two fragments of the cathedral; then the burgomaster shook himself, and perhaps shook off a feeling.

"A gloomy place!" he said. "If the townspeople have to pass through it, it might be more cheerfully lit. I must talk to Heer Steen about that."

"A wonderful place," said Johanna in a low voice to the professor. "I am glad to have been here."

"I come often," he answered; "but it is always new, and always full of suggestions. If there is something more than common in its expression this evening, you must remember that we have come to it in a sufficiently fantastic manner. It is not every night that it can be approached on skates by starlight."

"Happily, no," said Johanna. "Let us keep it a white night."

As she spoke, high up in the air above them the carillons smote the silence of the night with their silvery sounds. Clear, sweet, and pure the notes came dropping down, the notes of an old chorale, but penetrating and so unearthly that it needed little imagination to believe that it was the echo of some eternal or heavenly song of peace. When it ceased they were out in the paved street; the cathedral lay behind them; the moon shone on white roofs; the snow crackled under their feet. Johanna and Mathius walked side by side, silent again, though the others had found their tongues. When they

parted, it was still silently, but the strong clasp of his hand was perhaps intended instead of words.

She found herself thinking of it.

CHAPTER XVII.

“At lover’s perjuries,
They say, Jove laughs.”

THE next morning Johanna was arranging her store-room, and Constans, whose housewifely nature was strongly developed, had come in, and was busily engaged in replenishing the neat green *trommeltjes* ranged along the wall, with sugar, sago, and all the different stores. Constans’ talk had a fashion of trickling along in an even stream which produced little impression and required little interruption; Johanna was vaguely conscious that she was moralizing upon the weather, the skating, the sleighs, and the wolf-skins of Madame van Hoopt. She lost the thread of the discourse after a while, and was brought suddenly back to it by the sound of the professor’s name.

“Do you really suppose that Hilvardine will marry him, Aunt Johanna?” asked Constans, making a careful little course for the sifted sugar to travel from the paper bag into its *trommeltje*. “He is older than she, to be sure, but that does not so much matter; the Baron de Geef married Maria, and he was much older. It is only that—that he is the professor, and we have known him always, and it would seem so odd.”

“What are you talking about?” cried Johanna, amazed.

"Hilvardine and Professor Mathius! Have you lost your wits, Constans? Or who has been gossiping to you in such a ridiculous manner?"

"Oh, no one," replied Constans, not in the least offended—"no one has been talking about it; it would not be likely they would talk to me. But, you know, he does come here a great deal, and I am sure that Hilvardine is glad when he comes. Don't you see how seldom she puts on her old dresses now? She will want a new one long before mine is worn out. And then, she talks about him so much. She always remembers what he says, and she liked going to Madame van Weede's yesterday, though you know she does not like Madame van Weede herself. I wonder she doesn't, for I do so much; but she doesn't, and yet yesterday——"

"Yesterday naturally she enjoyed the skating. My dear Constans, I thought you had more sense than to build such an edifice out of such feeble materials. I am certain that the person who would be the most astonished if she heard you is Hilvardine herself."

"Oh no," said Constans, transferring her attentions to a packet of rice; "I am sure she thinks about it very often. If you only knew how pleased she is to be going in his sleigh!"

"That is very probable," said Johanna, laughing. "I think we are both rather silly, to be talking in this manner. Come, come, everything is in sufficiently high order to please even you; and if I am not on the spot to hear Luce's spelling the moment it is ready, it will certainly have passed out of her head by the end of five minutes."

"One minute, Aunt Johanna—the mustard-can!"

"What of it?"

"It is turned the wrong way."

"Heaven bless you for a true, orderly little Dutch

maiden!" exclaimed Johanna merrily, as she made the necessary alteration. "Now all is complete, and if you want to bribe Hendrik into goodness to-day, you may promise him snow pancakes."

"Ah, I am hungry already; I wish it were dinner-time," said Constans, going off with an air of stolid satisfaction. Johanna paused for a moment at the garden door before going upstairs. It was bitterly cold; icicles were hanging from the balcony where the sun of yesterday had a little thawed the snow. To-day there was no sun; only a heavy pall of grey clouds, from which shivering little flakes of snow every now and then fluttered down. As she stood there she heard the cathedral bells chiming the hour, and the old chorale letting drop its sweet, hesitating notes. It had not the unearthly charm of the previous night, it was more human, less spiritual, but it served to bring back thoughts which the night had awakened. As she remembered them, the professor seemed inextricably bound into their network; some subtle assurance that a sympathetic force had been at work between himself and her, was not wanting. Then came the recollection of Constans' words, which she had despatched with a laugh. Instead of laughing again, she set herself to ponder whether there were any grounds for the notion, and, as she went on, surprised herself by finding more than she had expected. She began to perceive that Hilvardine's moods were gentler and more attractive when he was present, and that it was not unusual for her to quote his sayings as having some authority. As for Mathius himself, he had often remarked upon the girl's beauty, which, as she reflected, was enough to prove the direction of a man's fancy, besides accounting for it. It was true that she felt a certain disinclination for the idea, for which she took herself to task, since, after all

the anxiety Hilvardine had caused, such a disposal of her was in the highest degree desirable. Perhaps the idea of Mathius as the means of disposal did not seem so much to his advantage; but certainly he was of an age at which he could judge for himself, and, it must be allowed, he knew all that could be said against Hilvardine. Johanna promised herself to be on the watch for the future, and so turned away from the icicles and the somewhat chilling prospect.

She found herself recurring to the new idea which had been flashed upon her so often that she became quite impatient with herself. It was true that Hilvardine was in excellent spirits, except when any one foretold a fall of snow; it was also true that she was at great pains with her dress, and that a new hat made its appearance in an incredibly short space of time. These, however, were signs which could not strictly be considered as evidence. The professor did not come to the Steens' that day, but Hilvardine spoke of having seen him. Johanna was the least little bit disappointed: she told herself that here would have been an opportunity for observations.

After all the fears, the morning of the picnic dawned full of promise—a crisp sunshiny day, with blue mists filling up the corners, and sparkling frost everywhere. Johanna had intended going with Hilvardine to the *rendezvous*, and seeing the start of the dozen or so sleighs. But Luce was ailing and cross, and she did not like to leave her. She sent Hendrik and Constans, therefore, alone with Hilvardine, and, as it was already settled who was to drive her, felt no uneasiness, and was only sorry to have missed a pretty sight.

If Hilvardine herself had other misgivings, she kept them resolutely under. She walked quickly, and yet took

the longest way, much to Hendrik's disgust, as he wished for a close examination of every sleigh, and saw no amusement in these out-of-the-way and unfrequented streets of his sister's choice. He grumbled, therefore, but got no good, for Hilvardine had a clear design in her head of avoiding inconvenient meetings until all had been arranged, and kept both eye and ear keenly on the watch wherever an opening in the streets gave an opportunity for an encounter.

In front of the Schuylens' house there was a broad open space where the hard snow was well trampled down, and where already some half a dozen sleighs were collected, the horses with bells and gay trappings, and the sleighs themselves looking like gaily decorated, fur-lined nests. Hilvardine cast a hasty glance upon them. She saw nothing of the professor, or of Van Regensdorf's fine bear-skins, and she ran quickly up the stairs, with the hope of avoiding unpleasant meetings until it was too late for interference. The room seemed full of people and of young eager voices.

"Here is another," said Minna Schuylen, who had a little fuss of preparation about her. "Mamma, Hilvardine has come; we shall soon all have collected."

"That is well," said Madame Schuylen. "The day is beautiful, but one is afraid of a change coming on, and I have no wish to be whirled home in a snow-storm. Let us see, who goes with who?"

"I am to have the pleasure of driving the Freule Minna," said a dark, thin young man with a retreating forehead, who for the last ten minutes had been anxiously engaged in drawing on a pair of irreproachable gloves.

"Very well; only take care of her," said her mother, smiling. "Baron, you are to be burdened with me; and

Jan will be sure to take Rolina Vanderbilt. Hilvardine, have you a charioteer?"

"Professor Mathius will drive me," said Hilvardine. Why didn't he come?

"Oh, then you will do very well," Madame Schuylen said, with a slight air of relief in her tone. She had given way to her daughter's entreaties to ask Hilvardine, but she had not been without her anxieties, since her son had insisted upon including young Van Regensdorf. Now, however, it all seemed to have settled itself in the most orthodox manner. Nothing could be better or more appropriate than that the professor, whom every one respected, should take Hilvardine. She put a little warmer touch of cordiality into her manner at once, as she inquired whether she were well wrapped up. "We will all go downstairs and see about the start. By that time the missing members will have arrived."

"Yes, let us go," sighed Minna, looking at her dark young man with a mixture of apprehension and pleasure. He was very rich, and his sleigh was the finest of all, but he could not drive. As they went down she whispered to her brother, "Jan, do you think it is safe?"

"Well, I wouldn't be you," was the encouraging reply. "Look out for a soft drift."

"Some one must really start," said Madame Schuylen, bustling up, "or we shall be all day in getting off. Come, Minna, you had better lead the way."

Hilvardine was standing on the edge of the group, and a little in the shadow of the doorway, when her arm was touched. She turned round and saw Van Regensdorf.

"I could not get away before; I have been raging," he said. "Here is my sleigh—to the left. Come at once, and we shall be out of the crowd."

She drew back quickly.

"I can't. You are too late; I have promised."

"Promised?—to any one but me? That is nonsense. Besides, it is easy enough to say you made a mistake. Come, be quick!"

"I cannot. I have been engaged for days for this drive."

His face darkened.

"You are engaged to me for all such drives. Whom have you been promising?"

She compressed her lips.

"Who?" he repeated.

"It is only Professor Mathius," she said, in a low voice.

"Only!" He laughed. "Oh, I knew very well who it was. But I am not going to give you up to him or any one else. Come!"

"I will not," said the girl angrily. "Don't you understand that it is all settled?"

"Ah, but there was a previous agreement. Well, wait, if you please, but you may make up your mind that I shall have a row with your professor as soon as he appears."

Hilvardine bit her lips; the blood had mounted to her face, but he was quite aware that at his words she glanced fearfully round before she said, in a quick whisper—

"You are mean, ungenerous——"

"You can pay me those compliments as we go along. Not that I am in any hurry."

He folded his arms and leant coolly against the house. She moved a few steps away; then came hurriedly back, and said in an agitated voice—

"Have it as you please. You are going the way to make me hate you."

"Now, the injustice of that! I am quite willing to wait and offer an explanation."

"No, no; come!" cried Hilvardine, in her turn. "Where is your sleigh?"

"Here, round the corner. Here is Schuylen, who will tell them we are gone on."

"Are you off?" said good-humoured Jan, lounging up. "People won't make a start. But I thought the Freule Hilvardine was going with Professor Mathius?"

"If he doesn't come, he can't expect her to wait all day," said Van Regensdorf, stepping into the sleigh and gathering up his reins. "Say she is gone."

"All right," said Jan, tucking the furs round Hilvardine. "Rolina and I come last. Hold hard a moment!" he added, laying a hand on the reins.

"What now?" said Willem impatiently.

"I see the professor. Perhaps the Freule would wish to change?"

"Make him my compliments!" exclaimed the other, with a laugh and a cut of the whip which sent his horse flying over the snow. "I hate meddlesome people," he remarked the next moment; "they always suggest the wrong thing."

Hilvardine was silent with mortification. As the horses sprang forward she caught a glimpse of Mathius' face, and already bitterly repented the step she had taken. If she had but been brave and stood resolutely by her engagement, Van Regensdorf might have quieted down, and avoided the shame of a scene. But she could not be sure. There was an angry look of compression about his lips which she had learned to know meant mischief, and which she dreaded. It mastered even her anger. When at last he looked round with a quick "Well?" she forced herself to answer.

"What does 'Well?' mean?"

"I am waiting for the pleasant things you mean to pour down on my unfortunate head."

"Why did you not choose a companion who would be more agreeable?"

"I could not. Angry or amiable, there is no one like you. You know my feelings, Hilvardine."

"I share them with others, however!" she said scornfully.

"Who has said that of me?" he asked angrily. "But you need not answer; it is your dear professor, no doubt. I owe him a good deal, and I will pay my debts one day, I assure you."

"You are mistaken," Hilvardine said hastily. "The professor does not take the trouble to discuss your character."

"Doesn't he? He's too magnificent for that sort of work, I suppose?"

"He is too good and too different from you, if that is what you mean," was the reply, in a low, strained voice.

"Oh yes, that is what I mean," said Van Regensdorf, with a disagreeable smile. He was a first-rate whip, but during these last sentences he had fretted the horses into wild excitement. They passed all the other sleighs; Minna Schuylen gave a little scream as they dashed by. Hilvardine cared nothing for the danger, if there were any; the quick motion suited her present mood, and had it been possible she would have added to their speed. The rush of keen air made all the blood tingle in her veins.

"Let us end all this. What good is there in it?" she said abruptly. "Even you must understand by this time that things can never be different. Why can't you cease to persecute me?"

"You called it loving six months ago."

"They irritated me into it."

"Thank you. Perhaps you are irritating me with the same effect."

"You are a man, I believe," she said contemptuously.

"Am I?" he said, with a certain savage tone in his voice. "By Heavens, you are teaching me what a woman can be!" As he spoke he struck the off horse sharply, and both animals bolted forwards. There was a fierce struggle of a few minutes, in which the sleigh swerved from one side to another; presently they were under control again. Van Regensdorf looked down at Hilvardine, who had neither changed colour nor moved. "I believe that did not frighten you in the least," he said, with a kind of reluctant admiration.

"*That?* No," she said, without any sign of relief.

Van Regensdorf looked a moment longer; then caught her to him and kissed her with vehemence. It was but a moment, and no one was in sight. In these parties etiquette demanded that the sleighs should keep pretty well together; Van Regensdorf had outstripped them all.

"Forgive me! It was irresistible!" he said, in a whisper.

"Forgive you!" she said scornfully. "You are a coward!"

"Take care! I am in the mood to leave the picnic to your professor, and to go driving on and on with you by my side. What do you say?"

He had frightened her at last; she gave him a quick look of terror. He laughed.

"What! you would not like it? You must be more civil to me, then, my Hilvardine, and not torment a poor devil to extremities. Think of all the hard things you have heaped on my head; not you, though. That's my consolation."

"Oh, why don't you believe?" she cried, breathing

quickly. "It is I, I, I—nobody else! What can I do to prove it?"

"Oh, you do your best," he said coolly. "I suppose I am naturally of an unbelieving nature. Or else I am so beautifully confiding—remembering the past and your expressions, which were so different."

"What do you want?" she exclaimed desperately. "Aren't you content with humiliating me in the eyes of the world? What will Madame Schuylen think now, when I had told her I was going with another person? What will they all say at your driving away from the rest?"

"Let them think and say what they like," he returned carelessly. "What care we? Do you suppose I am going on for ever with not so much as a crumb flung to my share? You forget our compact."

"You forget your part in it. Where are my letters?"

"Oh, safe enough. You need not trouble yourself about them."

"But you promised."

"Some time or other—to be sure."

"Oh!" cried Hilvardine, writhing, "have you no honour?"

"You have assured me I have not. All those fine sentiments you reserve for your professor's credit. Who knows what I might do with better treatment?"

"I am here with you to-day," she said, in a low voice. She would have added "I have submitted to an insult," but she dared not. She was beginning to feel oppressed with the fear of how Mathius and Van Regensdorf would meet. Mathius was not the man to bear to-day's actions tamely. For herself, it was unlikely he would ever speak to her again. How could things have been worse if she had let her lover do his worst? Yet a throb in her heart as she said this to herself made her feel as if there were

something worse; as if, by temporizing and holding the helm, she might yet save her vessel from the rocks. She forced herself to say, "Don't let us quarrel."

"You will not accuse me of wishing it," said he, with a laugh. "It appears to me I am the very model of patience. However, I echo your words—don't let us quarrel; on the contrary, let us enjoy ourselves, and forget all those disturbers of our peace behind."

"Only do not leave them so very far behind," she said, in a gentler tone. "Your horses are quieter now, and it will not be pleasant to find ourselves at Soesdyk long before the others."

"I like to be first," he said, checking them but slightly. "Hilvardine, what will you give me for those letters? Another kiss?"

She bit her lip almost through. The horrible humiliation of her yoke seemed unendurable. Yet she dared not fling it off. She said in a low voice—

"Be generous, Willem."

"Oh, I am obliged to make hard and fast compacts with you now, and if I did not know whom I have to thank for it, I should be implacable. You haven't answered me."

"Perhaps—I don't know."

She turned away her face, crimson.

"'Perhaps—— I don't know,'" he mimicked, with a laugh. "My pretty Hilvardine, you must speak more decidedly than that. However, I will think it over. What would you say now if I told you the letters were on me—in my pocket?"

She drew a long breath, and looked at him with an intensity before which his eyes fell.

"Ah," she said, turning away again, "you are deceiving me."

"Am I?"

He drew from his pocket a small packet, on which her eyes recognized her own writing.

"Oh, give it to me—give it to me!" she cried, stretching out her hand.

"No, no," he said, with a laugh, "you are not to be trusted. You have not even promised."

"I—promise," she said slowly.

"That's well. And when?"

"Oh, perhaps in public, before them all," she said bitterly. "Have you *no* thought of me? Give me the letters."

"When I claim it, then?"

She flung upon him a look of burning reproach. But her prize was too near to be relinquished. "Yes, yes!" she cried.

"Well," he said, putting the letters into her hand, "remember."

She caught the packet from him and thrust it into her pocket. It had not seemed possible to her that he would give them, and now the revulsion of feeling was so great that she was ready to be grateful. A load indeed was lifted off her heart, and for the first time she became conscious of things around her. Their road ran through a thickly wooded country, and though the trees were of no great size, but chiefly young oak and beech, they had sheltered the road, and the snow lay crisp and white under the horses' feet. Every now and then a wider expanse of snow, which in summer would be moorland, opened, and there were continual peeps of blue distance, and here and there a little bordering frozen canal, which rosy round-about children had converted into a sliding-place. Hilvardine smiled at them as she passed: she suddenly awoke to the fairness of the world.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Van Regens-

dorf, in a discontented tone. "Not of me, I'll swear. I was a fool to give you those letters, for now you'll treat me worse than ever."

"Now we'll be friends, and forget all about the foolish past," said Hilvardine happily. "I shan't treat you badly if you are nice."

"You'll drive back with me, for one thing?"

She meditated for a moment.

"Don't ask me that," she said.

"But I do."

"You put me in such a painful position."

"Not I. You got yourself into it."

Hilvardine was silent again; then she said in a gay tone—

"We need not talk yet about that. Drive back a little way, and let us see whether poor Minna has been upset or not."

CHAPTER XVIII.

“His rage, not his love, in that frenzy is shown.”

THE place which was to receive the gathering did not offer many attractions on a winter's day. It was pretty enough in its own way in the summer, for there was a goodly show of fine trees, and there were also many white and green country houses, which at this time of the year were deserted by their inhabitants for the greater sociability of a town. An uninhabited palace stood near, and the name of palace gave an air of magnificence to the neighbourhood; but in reality it was a very homely and kindly abode, as far removed from pomp as possible, and opening in the most friendly fashion to visitors. In January there was not much to attract. Snow lay before the inn, where in summer groups of chairs and tables suggested that the world should partake of fritters and *advocatenborrel*, and the effect was rather chilling than inviting. Inside, however, the people of the house had done their best. The white porcelain stove in the largest room was a real crackling furnace, and the table was spread with a goodly show of plates and small paper napkins decorated with blue designs. And, after all, it was only the first comers who received an idea of dreariness. As the sleighs drove up, gay with bright trappings, feathers, and with the merry tinkle of their bells—as their occupants sprang out and stood about on the beaten snow, wrapped in warm furs, and with rosy faces, the whole scene changed as if by magic. The people of the inn came out, smiling and welcoming; dogs stood and barked. Nothing could have been more cheerful and exhilarating than the effect.

"Are we all here?" said Madame Schuylen, bustling up. "One, two, three. There is one sleigh missing. Ah, Heaven! it is my Minna's. Has any one seen Minna or the baron?"

"We passed them."

"And we!"

"And we!"

It appeared that every one had passed them, although they had been the first to start. Madame Schuylen informed her friends that she was not in the least nervous.

"If it had been any one but the baron! But he is so dependable. I dare say he found that Minna enjoyed taking it leisurely. I assure you, she is not fond of furious driving."

"When it is likely to end in an upset," whispered Jan to Rolina. "Furious driving or no, I'll wager that's what has happened."

"Ought you not to go and see?"

"Yes, if you'll come with me."

"Oh, you would be all day in getting there. You should send Monsieur van Regensdorf. When he dashed past us it was like flying."

"He spends such a lot of money," said Jan. "Van Regensdorf will always have the best of everything."

"Is Mademoiselle Steen to be among the best?" inquired Rolina, rather maliciously. "Your mother did not look very well pleased this morning when she heard of the re-arrangement."

"She had to explain to the professor, you see," said good-natured Jan. "He mightn't have liked it."

"Was he angry?"

"Didn't show it, if he was. He's got himself well in hand. For all that, I shouldn't like to be the one to have a row with Mathius."

Jan looked blankly before him, as if for once his imagination had proved too much for him.

"You couldn't have a row with any one," commented Rolina softly. "Besides, the idea of a student quarrelling with his professor!"

"Yes, it's queer. But Van Regensdorf is a desperate sort of fellow."

"I wonder that Mademoiselle Steen isn't afraid of him."

If Rolina had only known it, she was. Each concession that she made to him she felt certain would be the last, and instead, it inevitably fettered her in some new fashion. She had got the packet of papers at last, and told herself continually that now she had all she wanted; yet an indefinable uneasiness made her doubtful, and the remembrance of the price she yet had to pay burnt in her cheeks like flame. It had always been a sort of proverb in the family that Hilvardine had no fear; if they could have looked into her heart now, they would have found fear reigning in its most abject form. The very consciousness of this helped to frighten her, to intensify it. Had it not been for its benumbing influence, she would have gone boldly up to Mathius, who was standing somewhat apart, and made some jesting excuse for her desertion; as it was, she kept nervously close to others, hoping that the moment of explanation might be delayed. But as she could not resist watching him, it fell out that he presently caught her eye, and strolled over. Her heart beat with violence, but she hid her agitation very successfully, and even managed to speak first. It is astonishing what an effort will do when it is met by a preconceived impression. Mathius thought there was a tone of triumph in her voice.

"I hope you were not vexed, mijnheer. You were so late in arriving!"

"Was I late?" A slight smile crossed his face.

"Yes, indeed; unless Madame Schuylen was too early. If you had happened to have forgotten your engagement altogether——"

"Ah, it was that supposition which made you break yours? Another time you must be more generous in giving law. I had not forgotten."

He spoke without the slightest irritation, and he had not mentioned Van Regensdorf's name, nor had she. Her spirits would have risen quickly, if she had not been conscious of a certain indifferent quiet displeasure which he was at no pains to conceal. "He despises me," she thought. How much more, if he had only known! Mathius himself was under the impression that he understood accurately. He was sorry for Hilvardine, because she had not the strength to break with Van Regensdorf, since he supposed she had a wish to do it, but of his own part in the business he understood nothing, nor how, with the best intentions in the world, he was hindering her as effectually as her worst enemy could have done. Hilvardine glanced fearfully in the direction of Van Regensdorf. If he came near, he must not find them talking on this subject; but before she could speak, Mathius said quietly, and because he thought of Johanna—

"Let me understand. Do you permit me to drive you home?"

She gave him a quick scared look.

"I don't know—I can't say. I don't think I must."

Mathius opened his eyes. "Surely the decision rests with you, and you alone?" he said, in a stern voice.

"Yes, of course," Hilvardine returned, shrinking. "But we have not begun to think about returning; Madame Schuylen may have places. Minna has not come yet. Where can she be? Every one is here but Minna."

"Hilvardine, tell me this," said Mathius, making a sudden step towards her. But at that moment there was a sort of murmur, "Minna! Here is Minna!"

"Oh, look! On foot! Something must have happened!" said Rolina Vanderbilt, hurrying past them. People pressed curiously towards the couple, and Hilvardine, glad enough to escape the awkwardness of decision, followed with the stream. Minna and the baron were advancing in a somewhat shamefaced way along the road, but they quickened their steps and assumed a cheerful air as they approached their friends.

"For Heaven's sake, has anything happened to you?" cried Madame Schuylen, anxiously. "Where is the sleigh?"

"A little accident——" began the young man; but Minna interrupted him.

"It might have been terrible but for the baron's presence of mind——"

"The horses shied——"

"Oh, dreadful!"

"And flung you out? My poor Minna!"

"Not—not exactly," said Minna, with some hesitation.

Then a heap of questions were piled upon them. Had the sleigh been upset? Had the horses injured themselves, or bolted? What horrid thing had happened?

"They were so unmanageable——" Minna began at last boldly.

"Wild beasts," put in the baron.

"That we preferred to walk. Oh, I assure you all, the walk through the wood was infinitely preferable."

"Infinitely," murmured the young man.

"Shall we walk back through the woods?" said Van Regensdorf at Hilvardine's elbow. She started and looked hastily back, and saw that Mathius was still near enough

to hear; indeed, Van Regensdorf had been at no pains to lower his voice.

"Then, where is the sleigh?" asked Jan, with a broad smile.

"We left it at the house by the great beech trees."

"You are safe!" cried Madame Schuylen fervently. "What does it matter about the sleigh! How good of you, baron, to bring her to me unhurt! I was beginning to feel quite anxious. But I knew I might trust your prudence."

"His gloves have disappeared," whispered Rolina. "That must have been his presence of mind in pulling them off."

"Well," muttered Jan, turning his broad shoulders towards the house, "to leave your sleigh behind without even being upset is a little beyond even what I expected." Aloud he said, "Come, we have waited long enough; everything is ready."

Hilvardine was nervously anxious as to her position at the long table. By care she managed to plant herself between an elderly gentleman and Rolina; but to her annoyance, Van Regensdorf took the seat immediately opposite. All through the long meal he made her uncomfortable by the air of possession with which he addressed her; never before, she thought, had he so openly flaunted their acquaintanceship, and this just at a time when she would have given worlds for reticence. It seemed to her as though the long courses of the luncheon would never come to an end; yet when it was over, what difficult passages did not lie before her? Rolina did not trouble herself to be very gracious. Hilvardine had appropriated the seat which she had designed for Jan Schuylen, and Jan's mother had looked some annoyance when she heard of the change which had taken

place in the order of the sleighs. So Rolina had no very charitable feelings underlying her remarks, and did not respond with warmth to the unusual efforts Hilvardine made towards conversation. The old gentleman might have been ready enough to talk to a pretty girl, but that he infinitely preferred his food, and found it convenient to entrench himself behind a sudden increase of deafness. Hilvardine found herself snubbed and baffled on either side, and across the table came the sound of Van Regensdorf's voice, making audacious little speeches, if not to her, at her, at the significance of which she trembled. This picnic, to which she had looked forward, to what dust and ashes was it not turning? Yet she was young enough for the anxiety to have no effect on her beauty, or, if it affected it at all, it was only to heighten it. Her cheeks were pale in tint, but her eyes glowed with strange troubled and ardent depths. Rolina, who was tall, plump, and good-looking enough, looked commonplace by her side, and knew it.

When the long business of the meal was over, and they all stood up, Hilvardine, who had been wishing it to end, suddenly felt as if she were being driven out of a shelter. Rolina went gladly away; each person appeared attracted to another. Where could she go? Fortunately, her old neighbour, having finished his luncheon, regained his good nature and his hearing, and was not ill-pleased to walk about with the prettiest girl of the party. He proposed a turn in the woods, if they could find a well-beaten path, and she gladly consented. It brought almost the first glow of pleasure she had had that day into her heart to see that, as Heer van Heemskerk spoke to her, Mathius was watching. He was exceedingly grave, but it consoled her to think that her movements interested him. As for Van Regensdorf, she

did not think he saw her. The party had quickly dispersed into gay little groups; some were going to the palace, others to call on friends. The sleighs were to be brought round at half-past three; meanwhile, each person might please himself. Hilvardine and the old gentleman had their walk almost to themselves.

"Isn't the snow a little deep?" he inquired, stopping and putting up his eye-glasses.

"Oh, it is quite hard and dry; and see how beautifully we are sheltered from the wind! You are afraid of the wind, aren't you?" asked Hilvardine artfully.

"Well, perhaps I am—perhaps I am," he said, smiling; "at least, I will be, to please you."

"Then, come this way," she said, striking down a still more lonely path. "I know it, and it is the prettiest of all. Besides, no one will follow us there."

That it was beautiful was true. The trees were of large growth, and their tall grey stems, their sweeping branches, their infinite multitude of tiny twigs crossing and recrossing each other, the brilliant shafts of sunlight falling aslant them, and the occasional openings in the under brushwood, made a fair picture in spite of the snow, which robbed all the foreground of colour. Nevertheless, Heer van Heemskerk, who had a sociable soul, looked at it with a slight protrusion of his under lip. One does not go to a picnic for solitude.

"Since when have you hated your fellow-creatures, my dear Freule?"

But Hilvardine was not to be turned from her purpose. She walked briskly on, and set herself to chat to her companion so pleasantly that, although he was conscious of being used for some reason, he said to himself that he had nothing to complain of. The walk, however, could not last for ever. After a while, they found them-

selves coming round towards the village, and then Hilvardine made circuitous *détours*, hoping, but not feeling sure, that her companion's twinkle of amusement was not due to a recognition of her stratagem.

"Now, what is it?" he was thinking. "Some lovers' quarrel—some unintentional slight, which a word and a kiss would make up? Why doesn't the young fool follow her here? She's on the watch for him, by the way I see her eyes travel down every path. Very fine eyes they are, too—enough to set a young fellow star-gazing. Why doesn't he come? I'd find a means of getting out of his way."

It will be seen by this that Heer van Heemskerk was not unmercifully disposed towards the romance of the day. He piqued himself, indeed, as much upon his sentiment as his good cook. "We shall come upon him yet," he said to himself; and smiled at the fulfilment of his prophecy, when, as they turned a corner, they met, almost face to face, a young man with a dark, handsome, somewhat arrogant face, who was advancing quickly in their direction. Hilvardine grew a little paler. Her companion welcomed the new-comer with unmistakable cordiality.

"Glad you're come," he said cheerfully. "It was dull work for Miss Hilvardine to tramp about with an old fellow like me."

"I prefer it," said the girl, shortly.

"I am sorry to interrupt your *tête-à-tête*, but Madame Schuylen was asking for Heer van Heemskerk."

"Oh, I'll go—I'll go! You'll take care of the Freule? Yes, certainly I'll hurry on, and you can follow at your leisure."

He walked quickly away. Hilvardine made no at-

tempt to follow. Van Regensdorf glanced at her with a smile, and lighted a cigar.

"You are not angry? I had to get rid of him. Why have you avoided me all the afternoon?"

"For you to prove that you do not respect my wishes, I suppose," said Hilvardine sullenly. She had torn a twig from a branch, and was breaking it into small bits with quick, nervous movements.

"You have the face to say so! What did I do for you to-day?"

She looked at him; then looked away.

"For that you owe me something, you know."

The hot colour flamed in her face, but she was still silent.

"When am I to have my reward? Now?"

A statue could not have been more motionless, more dumb. He looked at her and laughed.

"You don't give your consent in a rush of words, I own. However, we will put it off. I like to keep my good things; to have something to which one can look forward a little. I drive you home, remember. The start is postponed."

"I am not going with you," said Hilvardine, suddenly, and beginning to walk quickly along the path.

"Not? Oh, pardon me! I don't waive my privileges so easily."

"Am I to have no rights?"

"Not to go counter to your heart."

"My heart! That has nothing to do with the matter!" she exclaimed passionately.

"By the splendour of your eyes, but it has!"

"Say what you like. I repeat once again that things are at an end between us. If you were a man, you would not require me to go on and defy you."

"Ah, no, don't defy me!"

"Why not?" she said, with a sudden pang of fear. She slipped her hand into her pocket to feel that the letters were safe. He knocked a little ash off his cigar, and laughed.

"You have them?"

"Yes," she said, staring blankly at him. "What do you mean? Are they not mine?"

She hastily pulled out and tore open the packet, he watching her with the same amusement.

"Oh yes; they are yours."

"All?"

"All, and yet not all."

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed again, impatiently.

He changed his tone.

"Dear Hilvardine, do you suppose I could part with all your letters?"

"Oh!" she cried, and let her hands drop helplessly by her side. For a moment his eyes fell before hers; then he made an effort to justify himself.

"Why don't you trust me, instead of always standing on the defensive? You listen to the people about you, and treat me as a villain."

"Trust you—after *that*!"

The unutterable scorn in her voice, in her eyes, showed him that he had gone too far. He began to feel ashamed of himself, but the shame angered him.

"If you behaved as in old days," he said sullenly, "there would be no occasion for all this to—do. What good are your letters likely to be to me?"

"Oh, you will find them useful while you can threaten a woman!"

She was walking very rapidly. He strode by her side, furious with himself and her.

"You want to quarrel; you want to throw me off! Nothing has kept you even civil but your fear of these letters and shame at your faithlessness."

"I have none left now, then; that is at an end."

"Is it?" Then he put a constraint upon himself. "Hilvardine, dearest——"

"Hush!" She turned upon him fiercely. "Not that, if you please!"

"By Heavens!" he muttered, "you will drive me beside myself! We are close to all these people. I can't explain here, by-and-by——"

"Never!" she interrupted.

"You will not drive back with me?"

"I will never speak to you again!"

"If you go with the professor you will repent it."

"I care nothing," she said recklessly. "Do your worst. I have been a fool all this time, not to know that nothing can hurt me so much as what you call your love."

They were close to the house, as he had said. At the door were standing Madame Schuylen and half a dozen other people, amongst them Mathius. Hilvardine had not lowered her voice. In her present defiant mood, they might all have heard the words; perhaps they had. Van Regensdorf hung back, but Hilvardine walked straight into the very centre of the group to Mathius' side.

"Will you drive me back in your sleigh, mijnheer?" she said at once. "I am sorry that I did not wait longer this morning."

"With pleasure, Freule," said Mathius gravely. "We don't start just yet; had you not better go into the house and get warm?"

He saw—they all saw, of course—that something was the matter, and that the girl was in a state of rash excitement. Madame Schuylen came forward more kindly than she would have done but for the professor's speech, for he was one of those persons from whom others unconsciously take their cue.

"Yes, yes," she said, "come with me. There is a capital fire in the great stove, and if we are to be so late, we must certainly beware of starting chilled. I only hope that dear Minna will not stay out too long. If you go with the professor, I shall ask Heer van Regensdorp to drive them back until we reach the place where the baron left his sleigh; that will be a much better arrangement for everybody. You should not have been so hasty this morning, my dear child."

If Madame Schuylen hoped by this little speech to draw out an explanation or a confidence, she was mistaken. Hilvardine was pale as death, but the fire in her eyes bright; she held her head high, and felt something like triumph that she had broken free from the fear which lately had shackled her. She would think of no consequences. Let him do his worst. But of all this Madame Schuylen knew nothing.

CHAPTER XIX.

“The farthest from the fear,
Are often nearest to the stroke of fate.”

“COME, come, no more delays! Let us start—it is already growing quite dark.”

“There are no wolves, mamma,” said Minna, calmly.

This time it was Jan and Rolina who were missing; but they arrived before long, and Madame Schuylen gave a sigh of relief as she reflected that at any rate neither of her children had caused her anxiety by pairing with the wrong person. Other little misdoings she could forgive.

Hilvardine had waited indoors until Mathius came to tell her that the sleigh was ready. Then she came out, pale and silent. Van Regensdorf was standing near the door, evidently on the watch, for as they emerged he joined them and said abruptly—

“Freule Hilvardine, my sleigh is here.”

Before she could speak, Mathius interposed.

“Excuse me, Van Regensdorf, I can’t yield my claim to you a second time to-day. This engagement was made days ago.”

“It had better be unmade, then,” said the other, in an insolent tone. The professor looked calmly at him.

“Stand aside, if you please, sir. This way, Freule.” But the young man barred their passage.

“You shelter yourself behind your position. You are a coward! Take that!”

And as he said these words he struck at him across

the face with his glove. Hilvardine uttered an exclamation, but before the glove touched him Mathius had caught his wrist, held it like a vice, and sent him with force against some shrubs. Then he turned to Hilvardine.

"Don't let us have a scandal," he said, in a low voice; "the foolish boy has been drinking too much *advocatenborrel*. Get in, and let us leave him to calm himself."

Luckily, the others were taken up with their own affairs, and did not hear much. Rolina, it is true, said to Jan, "I am sure there was some sort of a scuffle a minute ago. I believe your young Van Regensdorf struck the professor."

But Jan was profoundly incredulous. "Students can't amuse themselves with that sort of thing."

"Well, there was something, depend upon it. There! whose sleigh has just started?"

"The professor's."

"And he is driving Mademoiselle Steen, and your friend is in a rage. I would not be Minna for worlds."

"He'll be all right," said Jan the stolid. "He's not such a fool as you fancy him. You stand just where you are, and I'll go and get the people together. It's time we were all off."

"I think I shall go back with your mother."

"No, you won't; you may go in by the stove though, while I pack the rest of them."

"Thank you, your highness!" She made him a curtsy, and went into the warm room. At the door Van Regensdorf brushed by her, and she involuntarily drew back, struck by the dark anger of his face. Minna was sitting by the stove. A candle had just been brought in, and its light fell on her fair hair and placid countenance. She looked the picture of self-contentment.

"We shall start in a few minutes," she said. "Heer van Regensdorf's horses are sure to pass all the others."

"Aren't you afraid of him? He looks so forbidding. Do, dear Minna, let us make some other arrangement."

"Not for worlds, my dear. I assure you, he has just made me a beautiful speech. And he is such a splendid driver!"

"Oh, splendid, no doubt; but it will be very dark in the wood, and for my part I should prefer some one who did not go so wildly. Come, be persuaded."

But Minna's mild obstinacy was roused. Perhaps before she settled down in life with her amiable Gustaaf she wished to experience a few more vivid emotions. Certain it was that nothing would induce her to give up her place in Van Regensdorf's sleigh. Even when they had started, had whirled past first one and then a second of the preceding sleighs, and Gustaaf made some faint remonstrances from behind, she laughed back at him gaily.

"It is like flying; it is delicious! Heer van Regensdorf, you mean, I hope, to pass them all?"

"I shall choose my position," he said briefly.

"One, two, three, four, five. We were seventh," commented Minna, presently. "Is that your position?"

"For the present."

Certainly Van Regensdorf took no pains to be agreeable. Minna had to be contented with the swift horses and the fine furs, which, after all, no one could see. It was dusk before they reached the woods, and freezing hard; the only sounds were the thud of the horses' hoofs on the snow, and the jingle of the sleigh-bells. The silence, the darkness, the ghostly trees standing up on either side, the strangeness about Van Regensdorf's manner, began to affect even the unimaginative Minna.

"Had we not better wait for the others?" she said timidly.

"Why?"

"It is so lonely here."

The young man laughed grimly.

"We shall find others in front," he said. It seemed to Minna that they began to go faster; it seemed to her also that she heard another faint jangle of bells before them. The horses flew, the blackness, the ghostliness deepened; her heart began to beat violently as the sleigh swerved from side to side.

"Heer van Regensdorf!" she cried, laying her hand on his arm.

"Well?"

He spoke sharply, and shook off her hand. It was as if he were trying to pierce the darkness before them, and concentrating his senses for that purpose.

"Pray do not drive so fast. Ah, Heaven, I am so frightened!"

He made no answer; perhaps he did not even hear, for, instead of checking, he urged on the horses. Minna began to sob faintly; an indefinable terror had seized her. Gustaaf at the back was holding on with all his might, and quite unable to offer consolation. Suddenly, through the darkness before them, Minna saw that another sleigh was in front. The sight gave her some relief, for if the desire to be first was the reason for Van Regensdorf's wild pace, he would soon have passed it, and things might go on more peaceably. But, as if the sight had intensified his intention, Van Regensdorf lashed his horses into uncontrollable madness. Minna screamed and caught his arm with both her hands; but he flung her off, stood up, and urged them on with shouts. There was no time for the foremost sleigh to

get out of the way before the other was upon it. There were cries, there was a shock, and then all seemed to be mingled together in inextricable confusion. The sleigh was overturned, and happily for Minna, she was thrown out by the shock, for the frightened animals rushed wildly forward, dragging it behind them until they kicked themselves free, and raced on unencumbered.

When Minna came to herself, she found herself grasped and held down so tightly that she believed both the sleighs to be upon her, and cried out for deliverance. None came at first, and she gradually became aware that it was Gustaaf who was also lying on the snow, clinging to her and uttering dismal groans. Finding this to be the case, she made a vigorous effort to shake herself free, and then to induce him to rise. But he assured her feebly that his back was broken.

"Help, help! Where is everybody?" cried poor Minna, in despair.

She looked round her, and saw a little way in front a small light moving. Hastening towards it, she found that Mathius had it in his hand, and was examining his horse, which was standing stock still, though trembling violently. The sleigh had not been overturned, and Hilvardine was still in it. Mathius uttered an exclamation of relief as he heard Minna's call.

"I was afraid you were ahead," he said. "We were just going to drive on in search, but part of the harness required putting right. Where are the others?"

"The baron is here, that is all I know," exclaimed poor Minna; "and he says his back is broken."

"Oh, not so bad as that!" said Mathius cheerfully. "But you are trembling all over. Do not be frightened, Freule; you will find no great harm is done. Get into the sleigh, and wait here a moment. Here are the reins,"

he added to Hilvardine, "but the horse will not move. You do not mind?"

"No, no—go," said the girl, in a low voice. The instant Minna was by her side, and they were alone, she grasped her hand and said eagerly, "Then, it was your—it was Heer van Regensdorf's sleigh? Tell me—tell me quickly, how was it? Did the horses start?"

"He was mad, I am sure!" cried Minna, sobbing. "He flogged his horses; he made them wild. It seemed as if he were determined to run into your sleigh. Ah, Heaven! what does it all mean? Why did I ever consent to go with him?"

Hilvardine, white as death, let go Minna's hand, and stared out into the darkness. "I was sure of it," she said, in a low voice, which Minna's own lamentations prevented her hearing. She began anew to pity her Gustaaf and herself, and to blame Van Regensdorf, when the other girl turned angrily upon her. "How can you say all this," she exclaimed, "until you know what has become of him?"

"Oh, I had forgotten!" cried Minna simply. She looked round her in terror, as if the great upspringing trees hid with their snow-laden branches some dreadful thing. At that moment Mathius returned, helping Gustaaf to limp along.

"Not much the matter, I hope," he said, in his cheery voice. "If you can make room for him at the bottom of the sleigh, the others must arrive in a few minutes. I am going to take out the horse, and ride on to see what has become of Van Regensdorf."

"Leave us!" cried Minna; but Hilvardine exclaimed feverishly—

"Yes, go, go!" and the next moment was out of the sleigh and helping to unbuckle the horse.

It was all done in a minute. Mathius rode quickly away; Hilvardine, in a fever of anxiety followed him on foot, in spite of Minna's cries. She felt as if it were impossible to remain still; she had, moreover, an undefinable dread of the two men meeting.

She need not have feared.

Mathius was right. He had not been gone five minutes, when the third sleigh drove up, and was rapidly followed by another. Heer van Heemskerk, Jan, and Rolina were all there. There were cries, exclamations, and a great deal of pity was heaped on Minna; it took time, also, to sift facts and to understand what had become of the others. Jan was just setting off in pursuit, when a speech of Minna's called him back to her side.

"Look here, Minna," he said in her ear; "don't go making mischief by talking as if Van Regensdorf had done this on purpose. That's absurd. It was an accident. Those horses of his are just devils, and they bolted. Do you hear?"

"Yes," murmured Minna, with a gasp; "but——"

"There is no 'but.' Mind what I say. If you don't, I'll—I'll put a stop to your engagement."

Jan had never spoken so authoritatively or so rapidly before; his sister promised meekly. The gentlemen took the lightest sleigh, and dashed off along the forest road, expecting momentarily to overtake the professor.

"The sleigh must have been dragged some distance," remarked Heer van Heemskerk, in a few minutes.

"But if he were thrown out, he would have picked himself up and run after his horses, if I know him," said Jan. "Hallo! here's something!" as his horse shied at a dark object. It was Hilvardine.

"And there is more," said Van Heemskerk, presently, standing up in great excitement.

He pointed before them. Jan flogged the horse up to the spot; all of them sprang out. The professor had tied his horse to a tree, and was kneeling down by Van Regensdorf's prostrate form. Old Heer van Heemskerk picked up the small lamp and held it close to the young man's face. They all looked—looked at the mark of a cruel crushing blow, a kick, on the right temple. Jan stepped back suddenly—

“Good God! not——” he cried.

“Yes,” said Mathius, rising to his feet; “he is dead.”

CHAPTER XX.

“‘How does your patient, doctor?’

‘Not so sick . . .

As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies,
That keep her from her rest.’ ”

THE lateness of the return so alarmed Johanna that when the bell rang she was the first to open the door. Hilvardine was already standing on the steps. She tottered into the house, and, to Johanna's amazement, flung herself on her neck, shaken with silent almost convulsive sobs, and speechless. No tender questioning could draw a word from her, and Johanna gave it up, and only murmured soothing words of endearment; but she was greatly alarmed at what from Hilvardine was inexplicable conduct, and thankful when Mathius, having got a passer-by to hold his horse, joined them. He was so grave that she instantly knew the trouble to be serious. She dreaded she knew not what, yet the truth, when it came, was sufficiently appalling.

“The poor child is overwhelmed—no wonder!” he

said gravely. "It was a terrible moment for her from first to last."

Johanna shuddered, and pressed her in her arms.

"I cannot understand it!" she exclaimed. "One has never heard of such an accident. Were his horses quite unmanageable?"

"They must have become so," said Mathius, very gravely; "but it is not likely we shall ever know all. There is no occasion for going below the facts. You will know how to comfort her: she is in a state of absolute exhaustion. I must not stay; there is a great deal to be done, and I am going back presently."

"Where?" whispered Johanna.

"Happily, there was a house not a quarter of a mile beyond. The horses were stopped there, and the people came out to look, seeing there had been an accident. That helped us. Take her up to her bed; she has hardly spoken all the way home."

He wrung her hand and was gone. Johanna called for Betje. Between them they managed to get Hilvardine upstairs, but she seemed to have lost all power. The town councillor was as usual out. Constans, attracted by the sounds, came to the door of her room, and burst into questions, which Johanna ruthlessly silenced.

"There has been an accident; I will tell you presently what I know. Put on your things, run down, and get coffee made as quickly as possible."

Between them they got Hilvardine into bed, heaped the great duvets upon her; and then Johanna, shading the candle, sent away Betje and the reluctant Constans, and sat down by the bed, patiently inducing her to swallow a few spoonfuls of coffee. When her brother came in, she allowed Constans, under promise of silence,

to take her place while she went out and briefly told him what she knew. Then she went back to Hilvardine, who was beginning to be restless and feverish, and stayed with her all the night.

By the morning she was worse rather than better, and they sent for the doctor. Shock—disturbance of the nervous system—great care—quiet. Every one knows the words, which do not express much, and yet carry a weight of anxiety. Johanna had her hands full; she could give no time to hear things she was longing to know, and which came to her in no more than broken sentences from Frans outside the door. For, strangely enough, after all the opposition and dislike on Hilvardine's part, she now could not endure that Johanna should leave her. It increased the restlessness so alarmingly that Johanna would not attempt to repeat the experience after two or three trials, but took up her quarters in the sick-room by day and night. Once or twice Mathius came, and, had it been possible, she would have gladly seen him. She had as yet no clear idea of what had happened on that day, and it was only from him that she felt she could learn the truth. Hilvardine sometimes talked of it almost incessantly, but when she did so she was not herself, and Johanna could not make out how much self-reproach belonged especially to the picnic, or how much to the preceding months. Not knowing that the girl had driven there with Van Regensdorf, she was puzzled by Hilvardine's constant allusions to being with him in the sleigh; and though the town councillor had heard so much from Madame Schuylen, he did not think it of sufficient importance to mention in his short daily interviews with Johanna. Constans told her of the funeral, and of all the students and professors attending; but Constans, though as patient and unselfish as possible,

required to be checked in the whispered communications she was anxious to make to Johanna, which invariably excited and upset their patient. Frans spoke a great deal of Madame Marken's anxiety; to his sister this appeared almost ludicrous.

Hilvardine lay so long in a critical state that the doctor became extremely grave. The shock had evidently been most severe in its effect; she seemed to be wanting in power to throw it off. The strain on Johanna, too, became excessive, and with her there was no one to exercise authority and oblige her to take rest. She was always there, always alert, always ready to soothe. "Mejufvrouw Johanna is a wonderful nurse," said the old doctor contentedly. It was true, but it was at a cost which the others did not reckon. Mathius was the most uneasy.

And it was Mathius who saw her first. One day, when Hilvardine was drowsy with the effect of an opiate, Constans came mysteriously into the room.

"The professor wants so much to see you, Aunt Johanna. Will you please go into the drawing-room, and I will stay here."

Johanna glanced at Hilvardine. Her eyes were wide open, and the restless look in them.

"I cannot go," she said decidedly.

"Yes—go, go," murmured the girl; "go. Make him tell you——"

Johanna hesitated, but it was almost the first wish that Hilvardine had expressed. "Very well," she said calmly. "Constans will stay with you. Try to sleep." But she was haunted by the eager eyes which followed her as she left the room, and by the remembrance that his name had been perpetually in her ears during the girl's wanderings.

"Heavens! how pale you are!" was Mathius' greeting.

"I am like an owl coming out of the darkness, and blinking," said Johanna, with a smile. "You don't know how odd it seems to be in the world again."

"Do I represent the world?"

"Indeed you do. The very room is a little alarming, it is so light and so evident."

"You have had too much on your shoulders. How is she?"

"Perhaps better; it is hard to say. She wished me to see you. I think when thought comes back to her, there comes a terrible feeling of bewilderment, and it may be that I shall be of more use when I know more. Please tell me all; tell me about that dreadful day from the beginning. You must remember I have heard nothing."

She listened attentively while Mathius went through its incidents. When she heard that Van Regensdorf had driven Hilvardine to the place, she exclaimed—

"That explains—in one way! In another it is mysterious, for I am sure she was looking forward to going with you."

"I am afraid," said Mathius, in a low voice, "that she feared, and never had the courage to break off relations with him. He was always violent when his will was crossed, and it is very possible that she thought if she did not yield there would be a scene. That's my theory."

Then he went on to tell her of the affair at the door of the inn, to which Johanna listened breathlessly. Seen by the light of what followed, it had a sufficiently sinister aspect; but the professor would have none of this. He scouted the idea of design in the accident, though to her woman's intuition everything pointed that way. He maintained that he was excited, perhaps had drunk too

much; that he wished to pass all the other sleighs, and that his horses became uncontrollable.

"With his head not clear, he may well, poor fellow! have pulled the wrong rein. The Freule Minna owns to having seized his arm—the most idiotic thing she could do; but some women are idiots! I might have got further out of the way, but that I believed there was plenty of room, and they came the wrong side. How on earth we righted ourselves I can't tell you. I was thrown down, and the reins twisted out of my hand. A great piece of the sleigh is knocked off. As for him, Mademoiselle Minna says that he was standing up. It is impossible to say, but I should suppose that the shock flung him forward; his horses were plunging and kicking, and one of them must have kicked him on the temple. Then he was dragged to the spot where he was found. There! you are looking whiter than when you came in, but you would not have been content without hearing the whole horrid story."

"No—it was necessary I should know," said Johanna, in a very low voice. She was silent for a few minutes, and the professor, watching her, noticed as he had never noticed before the pure goodness of her face, and the delicacy of its lines.

Presently she looked up with a shudder. "Oh, it is awful!" she exclaimed. "So quickly! Not a moment's time!"

Mathius waited for a while before he answered, "I expect not one of us knows how much there might be said for him. Since I have seen his people, I have understood something."

"And One understands all," said Johanna. "Yes; we must leave the mystery alone." She was silent again. "And think of that poor child!" she added at last, as if

finishing her thoughts. "I hope she will be spared the world's blame."

The professor took a bundle of letters from his pocket, and laid them on the table. "Those are hers," he said.

A look of relief crossed her face, and she put out her hands eagerly. "You *are* good, to take so much trouble." It suddenly struck her that the person for whom he had taken the trouble might be so dear to him that her thanks became quite unnecessary.

Mathius could not think why she faltered and suddenly drew back her hand. "I had no great difficulty," he explained. "An uncle came over to take all the poor boy's things away. He was glad enough of a little assistance; and when we came to letters, I asked him for all in this handwriting. Beyond the signature, she may rest assured that not a word has been read."

"It will be a great relief to her when she is able to be told. Poor child, she is so young!"

"I have pitied her with all my heart," Mathius said warmly. "She has had a terrible experience. She will come out of it all the better, you will see."

"Yes," said Johanna, "if God gives her back to us." Her eyes filled with tears.

"She will get well," said the professor confidently.

It seemed to her as if she ought to say something encouraging to help his hopefulness. "She has a fine character. Many of her mistakes are owing to her mother's death just at the time when she seemed most to need her love, and I have not been able to take her place. I believe it would always be easy to lead her."

"Her faults are open and above board," he said absently.

Johanna thought that he was dreaming over Hilvardine's character. Had the girl really gained this

man's love? Would she prize it? She looked at the timepiece, and sprang up. "I must go," she said hurriedly.

"Go!" said Mathius, in a vexed tone. "But I have not said half. It has been a ridiculously short time."

"Long for me," she said, as she took up the letters. "Thank you again. I am so very glad. I think it will help Hilvardine to get well more than anything. And I know you will do your best for her if there is any talk."

"For you, for you all!" he exclaimed, so eagerly that as she went up the stairs she smiled at the thought that he meant to take all the family to his heart with Hilvardine.

Hilvardine herself lay with her eyes—so large now—wide open, watching the door. Constans got up and began to explain to Johanna how restless she had been, and how she had given her the medicine two minutes before the time, to which variation a large explanation hung. Sometimes Johanna dreaded these explanations, and just now she read the yearning in the elder girl's eyes. She gave Constans a word of praise, sent her away, and sat down by the bed.

"The professor?" The weak voice seemed to come from a distance. Its youth made its weakness the more pathetic.

"He brought these letters," said Johanna, in clear, direct tones, laying the packet on the bed. "They are yours. No one has read a word."

Hilvardine turned her face away. Johanna could not tell how she took it, but her next words made her suspect that she was wandering again.

"My pocket—in the pocket——"

Johanna always tried to humour her fancies. She got up now, and took out of a wardrobe the dress which Hilvardine ordinarily wore; but she waved it away with

impatience. She took another, with no better success; finally it appeared she wanted the dress worn at the picnic, and then Johanna understood, for in the pocket was another bundle of letters.

“Burn them—all,” said the feeble, determined voice.

Johanna knelt down by the stove in front of the fireplace, opened the little door, and thrust in the two packets. There was a dull roar. As she came back to the bedside Hilvardine gave a sigh of relief. She closed her eyes; after a time it was evident that she was sleeping quietly.

From this time she improved steadily, though slowly. She said very little; often she lay for a long while without speaking. Her thoughts were evidently at work, and after these spells she showed particular signs of exhaustion; but the results she kept to herself. Johanna had feared that as her health returned her old feelings towards her would also revive; nevertheless, of this she showed no sign. On the contrary, it was difficult for Johanna to leave her, and if she were left to Constans she invariably looked whiter and more fatigued. So it came to pass that Johanna and the baby—the little blue-eyed Maria—were her two chief companions. A few questions she asked on the dreadful subject, which doubtless haunted her. Johanna was glad when she could speak and break the ice, though, after all, there was small satisfaction to be gained from Johanna’s answers. She knew too little herself, and she was anxious not to force the girl’s confidence by asking questions.

Suddenly, from having been quite indifferent, Hilvardine became impatient to move into the sitting-room.

“You shall go,” said Johanna, with a smile, “but you must expect visitors.”

"I want to see the professor," returned Hilvardine, in a low voice.

"And no one else?"

"Oh, no one. Don't let any one else come."

She was persistent in putting on her dress; though, when on, the black increased the look of illness so much that Johanna dreaded the effect of her seeing herself in the glass. She listened intently for each sound, and was so greatly disappointed when night came without bringing Mathius that Johanna promised her that he should come on the morrow. She drew her brother aside, and begged him to let the professor know in the morning.

"Why should she wish to see him?" he asked, in a dissatisfied tone.

"I have not heard her say, but I can fancy—can't you?—that there are many things she would like to ask him."

"I think it a very unsatisfactory state of affairs," persisted Frans crossly. "Here are her nearest friends not yet admitted, and the professor sent for. I shall certainly request Madame Marken to be so kind as to look in to-morrow."

"Not to-morrow, please; she is so weak."

"Then, she can't see the professor."

"But the professor was there that dreadful night, and she was with him. It will do her good to talk out some of her thoughts."

"She ought never to have gone to the picnic. There was the most foolish mismanagement of that affair from first to last."

Johanna's indignation broke out. "Who was the person to have controlled it, then?" she asked quickly.

He looked at her in an odd way. "They want a

mother, that's the truth," he said slowly. "You do your best, my poor Johanna, but——"

And then he went away, leaving her with a vague oppression of sadness. What did it all mean? No speculations were likely to be of much use.

She took care that Mathius saw Hilvardine alone, without disturbance from the family, who were somewhat inclined to extort compensation for enforced quietness. She took also many little precautions lest his first sight of Hilvardine should shock him; but she need not have feared, for excitement gave the girl a colour as delicate as a wild rose, and Mathius continued to be more distressed at Johanna's own look of weariness. It was a soft grey day, occasional gleams of sunshine lighting it up with silvery tones; the snow had gone, a good deal of rain hung about, and the tender colours were those which made the most beautiful background possible for the tall houses, and for the great cathedral tower, itself all soft red and grey. The trees in the garden had an air of gladness at having shaken off their cold burden. There was no spring as yet, but thought of it, and the mere thought of spring is joy. Hilvardine felt it in her veins. Its consciousness gave her a sort of shock; she had felt sure all happiness was over, and that life stretched out cold and leafless before her. She was young enough to insist upon the perpetuity of misery, and to cling to it as if there were something wicked in letting it go. It gave her another shock when Mathius came in with a smile on his face. He was grave when he spoke of Van Regensdorf, but he refused to keep to that subject; what she wanted to know he told briefly. To tell the truth, he was a good deal disappointed that Johanna had not stayed in the room. Hilvardine began

to see his eyes wandering to the door; it gave her a sharp pang.

"The Freule Johanna is better, I hope?" he said at last, it must be owned with a good deal of awkwardness.

"Better?" repeated Hilvardine, startled.

"She looked so worn out. Is it possible," said Mathius, rather sternly, "that no one has told you how close a prisoner she was kept in your room at first? She wants air and rest sadly."

He reproached himself immediately, for the girl became very pale.

"I—I did not know. It seems to me, I knew nothing."

"How should you?" cried the professor remorsefully. "I am a brute. But you will go away—they told me you would go away—and she will go with you. That is all she wants—change."

"Yes, I see; I have been very blind," she said slowly and faintly. "Will you go now; I am not very strong."

"And I have done you harm," he said, distressed.

"No; good, I think. Truth is always best."

"It was not you—it is not you who should have to think about it. You must think of yourself."

"I have done that a good deal—unsuccessfully, on the whole," said the girl, with an expression he could not fathom. It puzzled him whenever he remembered it.

CHAPTER XXI.

“You can encourage the timid, restrain the bold, punish the wicked, but for the weak there is no help.”

THE town councillor had some reason for declaring that it would have been well had his advice been taken, and Madame Marken admitted before the professor. Hilvardine certainly went back for many days; her lassitude was almost unconquerable, and her depression perplexed and alarmed Johanna, who had expected quite a different result. She did not see Mathius for some time; when she did, she attacked him.

“What did you do to Hilvardine?”

He looked guilty. “Has she been worse? I was afraid that I tired her. I must have prosed too much. She seemed to give up all of a sudden.”

“You were talking of something exciting?”

“We were talking of you.”

“Of me?” The rosy colour flashed all over her face.

“I am afraid she thought I was laying the blame of your ill looks on her.”

“I am not ill.”

“Then you look so.”

She was conscious of a glad delight in the thought of his caring for her looks, and then of shame at her own pleasure. What was Mathius to her? After Captain Wrangel, it would take a great deal to persuade her that any one cared for her, and here she had had a warning that he cared for another. She resolved that she would not forget her warning, and every chivalrous feeling in her heart stood up on the side of Hilvardine, who was helpless and at her mercy.

"When is your patient going away?"

"When she has recovered from her depression. You will have no more interviews until she comes home her own self."

"You will go with her?"

"I? You are very uncomplimentary, but I forgive you! I shall stay and superintend the spring cleaning. She goes to an aunt. Already my household is sufficiently disorganized."

"And your health?"

She stopped him with a smile. "I am well, I assure you." Somehow, he could not urge her as he had intended; there was something in her manner which, though perfectly kind, put a little fence round about her. Perhaps she thought she had been curt, for she added, "And my brother can hardly get on without one of us, though the evenings are getting shorter."

Mathius wondered whether she knew where his evenings were generally spent, and whether she saw as clearly as the rest of the town to what point he was drifting. People were now talking about that. The town councillor's family had certainly been of use in providing topics of conversation during the past year. But he did not venture to allude to his wonderings.

From something Hilvardine had said, Johanna expected to have a good deal of trouble in persuading her to go to the two old great-aunts who had offered to receive her at Haarlem. She found herself again mistaken. The girl wished to go, and as soon as it was possible Johanna took her there, and saw her established in a pleasant house not far from the wood. Johanna was always glad of an occasion for going to Haarlem. The place has an historic fame which appeals to the heart of every Netherlander. The grand old cathedral, with its

little old-world houses clinging round it, is crowded with warlike memories of horror and courage, of despair and triumph. There it stands as it stood then, calm through all, its bells swinging in the outer air. The great organ peals forth, the people come and pray and look curiously at the holes where cannon-balls buried themselves. There, outside in the square, stands Lorenz Coster; there, in the Stadshuis, we find ourselves in goodly company, painted, as such company was never painted before or since, by Frans Hals. Peace and war—and the years roll on, and the eternal purpose brings discord into harmony, though we may be often only conscious of the jarring notes.

Mademoiselle van Rensalaer and her sister, Clara's aunts, were excellent but somewhat severe ladies, who carried their virtues stiffly, and dressed them up in whalebone. They had never liked Clara's husband, and therefore disapproved of Johanna. She saw, however, that they would do well by Hilvardine, and left her there without anxiety, going to a shop to buy *heerenbrod* for the children on her way to the station. When the train came in, the first person who put his head out of the window was the professor. He made a number of elaborate explanations about having been at Leyden—so elaborate that Johanna, who at first accepted his presence quite simply, began to suspect an ulterior motive. If he were really anxious to know how Hilvardine had borne her journey, it was proof of great interest, and certainly it was of this that he chiefly talked. Johanna sat, leaning a little forward, looking at the grey watery scene, and quietly answering his questions. Presently she asked him if he knew North Holland.

"Alkmaar—well," he said. "I have a brother there."

"When I do go away," she said, with a smile, allud-

ing to his insistence on that point, or perhaps to something else which forced itself upon her mind, "that is where I believe I shall go. I have the prettiest remembrance of Alkmaar one bright market day. It was literally golden with cheeses. However, I should not be in the town itself, but on one of the *polders*. An old nurse of ours married a farmer; and if I can make up my mind to sleep in a box-bed, I believe the life would be charming."

"And you would leave us all behind you?"

"Well, yes," said she, laughing; "town and university are hardly likely to follow to my farm. But I will send you an occasional cheese by way of remembrance."

"You talk as if you were going for ever," said he discontentedly.

"Oh, well, everything comes to an end. Frans may find he does not want me any longer."

It did not seem an improbable prospect, according to the direction the professor's thoughts had long taken; yet it filled him with dismay.

"You would not live with him!" he exclaimed.

"Come, we are going too fast," said Johanna, anxious to avoid anything being put into words. "Perhaps you will only get rid of me for a short flight. I own I have a longing for Alkmaar."

Mathius was silent. Presently he said, in a low voice—"Have you thought what Hilvardine would do without you?"

"Oh, often!" she said, with great cheerfulness. "Hilvardine is a girl soon to develop her own interests. I foretell that her character will be marvellously deepened and steadied by the shock she has gone through. That poor young Van Regensdorf had not really touched her heart; it was just a girlish fancy, and the folly of young mirthfulness. That is over, poor child!"

"Yes, that is over," said Mathius gravely; "but stones set rolling cannot be called back."

Johanna looked at him with some perplexity. He was thinking of what she had never realized—the inexorableness of result; yet he did not know in what manner his own life had perhaps been affected by Hilvardine's conduct. There had been a moment in which he had been greatly attracted by her.

When they reached the station, Madame Marken was there. The professor departed with a bow; Madame Marken and Johanna walked home together.

"So you have got rid, for the present, of your turbulent young charge?" she demanded.

The words stung Johanna, whose spirit could flame out with heat and indignation at times. Who had encouraged Hilvardine? Who had advised her father to leave her alone? She gave Madame Marken a look which might have withered her up.

"I have no turbulent charge," she said briefly.

"Ah well, she is tamed for the present, no doubt," returned the other, with a laugh. "It will not last. My excellent Johanna, be as angry with me as you please, but permit me to assure you that you will never get on with Hilvardine, simply because you will never understand her. What does a soul like yours, calm and conscientious, and orderly, know of a creature whose moods follow each other like a troop of mischievous children running helter-skelter? You think you have got her into some secure path, and hey, presto! she is over the way, peeping at you from between the branches. You would provide her with some admirable husband; out of sheer contrariety she will run off with another. Fire and water will work together as successfully as you and Hilvardine."

In spite of her anger, Johanna felt a pang of dismay, recognizing the shrewdness of the remarks. Still, she would not show that she was dismayed.

"Fire and water produce steam, remember," she said.

"Oh yes," answered Madame Marken, indifferently; "and you are likely enough to blow up, if that is what you mean. You don't like me, Johanna. It is a pity, for I could help you."

"Perhaps we are also fire and water."

"Perhaps. But, at any rate, I think I understand you."

"You give me credit for being remarkably dense," said Johanna, piqued. "I, it seems, am to comprehend nobody."

"Like to like, and crooked to crooked," retorted Madame Marken. "No; I think it probable you will be often deceived. And you will always be blind to your own interests. You are at this moment."

"Possibly not so completely as you think."

Madame Marken appeared to consider this.

"I think so, nevertheless," she said presently. "However, let me give you two words of warning—Don't judge too harshly, and don't sacrifice yourself for imaginary duties. Here I branch off. Good-bye."

Johanna went her way, thinking of these words. What was their hidden meaning? To a certain extent they confirmed fears which she was always trying to keep shapeless and vague in her mind; she came to the conclusion that in them Madame Marken was sounding a note of preparation. But it appeared to her that they touched some further chord, and what this might be she could not satisfactorily read.

The house felt empty without Hilvardine, who had required so much care and nursing that she had filled a place in every one's life. But the children, having

seen less of her, had turned to their aunt, and were at last on excellent terms with her. Hendrik now went to a small school, Luce did her lessons with Johanna—a stolid ceremony which gave no large apparent increase of learning, but produced results in the end. Johanna took the present opportunity to devote herself more entirely to the children: she read with Constans, and helped her with music. She managed to have few spare minutes, and therefore kept inconvenient thoughts at bay. When she went out, if the children were not with her, she made her way to the *Diaconessehuis*, and spent her time among the invalids there. So a fortnight passed away. March was upon them, in his most blustering mood. The great boats had to furl their chocolate-coloured sails and lay by when the squalls were at their fiercest; the vast skies were full of movement, of rush, of tempestuous gatherings; from some parts of the country there came notes of dread from the polders and the dykes, and all the dyke inspectors were in full activity. Hilvardine wrote that she was well, and in danger of dying of *ennui*. She hated the neighbours, because she heard so much of them, and if she did not come home at once, she should certainly end by shocking the aunts beyond endurance. She did not add that one fertile subject of irritation was their persistence in ascribing all of which they disapproved to Johanna's influence. The girl, wilful even in her sorrow, felt herself cramped and fettered beyond endurance. As usual, she seized her remedy, and the letter Johanna received one evening told her that she was coming home the next day.

It seemed a pity, but, after all, the object had been gained, and Johanna was surprised at her brother's violent disapprobation. Evidently his annoyance was very great, and he said much about disregard of his

wishes; but when his sister offered to write or to telegraph, he would not decide.

"It is quite easy," urged Johanna.

"If she has made up her mind to come, come she will if you write a hundred times. Besides, I know the aunts, and they hate changes. What possesses her to come in this unexpected fashion, giving one no time for preparations?"

"But, dear Frans, really no preparation is required."

"Oh, excuse me, I know what I say. I have half a mind to——"

"To what?"

"To telegraph."

"Let me do it, pray."

"No, no; I must think, I must consult—— If I settle to telegraph, I will go to the office before I come home."

Johanna looked at him. He reddened. Evidently, then, it was Madame Marken who was to be consulted. She took up her work; he left the room. Constans began as soon as he had departed.

"How often papa goes away for tea! Betje says it is to Madame Marken's. Do you think it is? Do you think he is going to ask her about Hilvardine? It does seem so odd!"

"If I were you, I would not let Betje talk."

"But one can't help wondering," said Constans, naïvely, "and nobody else would tell one anything about it. I suppose it amuses him to go there. Don't you think that must be the reason, Aunt Johanna?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, so do I. Betje nods her head when I say so, but I dare say that is just because she does not understand."

"Very likely," said Johanna, feeling thankful to Betje that she had abstained from more open hints, and then feeling angry with herself for the idea that they could be justified. There was no one to whom she could confide the doubts and fancies which had not originated in, but at least had been quickened into life by, Frans' manner this evening—except, perhaps, the professor, and of him she had seen very little since Hilvardine's departure. Once or twice he had come to the house, but she had been out or engaged. Besides, though he would have understood and sympathized with her, something within her revolted at the idea of an appeal to his sympathy. Clearly there was nothing for it but to turn her back upon the haunting foreboding, and to wait until it took a more material shape before wasting thought upon it. She had not to wait long.

In the morning the town councillor was minute in his inquiries as to the time of Hilvardine's return. Johanna fancied he might have some intention of going himself to fetch her. She did not herself care to repeat her visit of a fortnight ago, for the great-aunts had been cold enough in manner to prove to her that she was unwelcome, and Hilvardine's letter had contained no hint of an invitation. The girl would be safe enough in a ladies' carriage; at the same time, it was not a bad opportunity for Frans to go and call upon Clara's aunts. But he hastily repudiated the idea. There was a meeting at the Stadshuis; there was a press of town business. He should be engaged the whole day, and it was not even probable that he would dine at home.

"Then, I will meet her at the station," said Johanna, absently. She found herself wondering where he was going to dine.

"If you will be so good. Don't let her walk back, if you think it too much for her."

She was glad of that little speech. Indeed, during the morning, when he fidgetted in and out of the room where she was teaching Luce, he was more kind and affectionate—more like his old self than he had been for a long while. He promised Luce, whose appetite for sweets was insatiable, a tin of Delft cakes; he brought in a knife for Hendrik, and a woollen lamb for the yellow-haired baby. Johanna felt as if her fears had been foolish and unjust. Her heart leapt up. All her life she had kept a heart for other interests besides her own, so that it was free to leap up now, though there was nothing very cheerful in the prospects of her own life. Nay, she would scarcely have admitted this, for her faith that all that was brought to bear was for the best was no weak, pretended support, but strong to meet the heaviest attacks, and, if best, then she held she had no right to treat it as the worst. A good many people say one thing and act the other: Johanna was true to her faith.

That afternoon she stayed at home, making Hilvar-dine's room look cheery. Before her illness she had shared it with Constans, and now the sisters were to be together again. Johanna put some bright little touches, and made a few changes to take off the memories of illness. She was standing in the middle of the room with a chair in her arms, when Betje appeared at the door with a letter.

"Put it down, please," said Johanna. She carried her chair to its place, arranged its cushion, and the universal Dutch footstool, looking carefully round the room to see if more was needed in the way of adornment, before she turned to her letter. Then she saw that it was directed in Frans' handwriting, and her heart sank unaccountably

at the sight. Why should he write, when they had so lately parted? and what could be the subject of his communication?

She put the questions to herself with a feeble hope that some swift and satisfactory answer might leap into her mind before she opened it. All the time she knew as well as if the words were staring at her, what its contents would be. It was like Frans to write, and in this manner to evade the disagreeable task of telling her. "I wonder that he did not get Madame Marken to do it for him," thought poor Johanna, bitterly.

He wrote at length, beginning with many expressions of affection and gratitude. He could never tell his sister what he owed her for the past year. Without her his house would have been sadder even than it had been, and he was fully aware that she had set aside her own hopes and prospects in order to be a mother to his children. It was a strong feeling of the injustice of expecting such a continued sacrifice from her which had led him to contemplate his present step.

"It would be a real satisfaction, dear Johanna, to know that it is not too late for your happiness to be secured. I am told that I was selfish in claiming so much from you last summer. I dare say I was; grief *is* selfish. I only trust I am now offering an escape of which you can still avail yourself."

What this escape was to be, it took him some time to tell in plain words. It was a step which he had gradually become convinced would have the happiest results for his children. It required an immense effort on his own part to reconcile himself to it.

"You will understand that at first sight it appeared beyond my powers, and you will also understand that I could never have brought myself to it, had I not known

that nothing on earth which could happen to me now could ever change my feelings for what is past. But I am assured that, in securing the affection of a most estimable person, I am acting not only for my own happiness, which is a very secondary affair, but for that of my children, who must greatly benefit in again finding a mother; and for yours, my dear sister, in giving you freedom if you desire it, or a happier home than you now have, if you will remain with us."

This was preliminary, as Johanna soon found. The real point required a longer preamble and more elaborate adornment, in spite of which Johanna could hardly compass it. She read it over more than once. It could not be true! Yet there it stood in black and white. The town councillor and Madame Marken disliked a long betrothal, and the first steps towards their marriage would be taken at the Stadshuis in a fortnight's time.

"I ask you of your kindness, my dear Johanna, to make this known to Hilvardine and my other children, and I know you will do your best to spare me what might be very painful to my feelings. I leave all in your hands."

The letter fell from her hands. This, then, was the welcome she had to offer to Hilvardine. "One little year! Oh, my God! are the dead mourned no longer?" One year! Why, Clara's grave still looked raw and new. One year! her baby could not yet even walk! One year, and a new wife, and that wife Madame Marken! Her head whirled with the strange unnatural thought. How would Hilvardine take it? She dreaded to reflect. She was certain that the thought had never presented itself to the girl; she had not even so much preparation to fall back upon as she herself. Johanna's task seemed to her an impossible one. Then she glanced at the timepiece,

and saw that in ten minutes she must start for the station. She hastily made up her mind that she would tell Hilvardine on her way home. The letter still lay on the floor; Johanna felt a strong dislike to touching it. At last, and with an effort, she picked it up and thrust it into a blotting-book on the table. Constans would not return for an hour, and no one else was likely to enter the room. If it had been any one else it might not have seemed so startling, but for Madame Marken to be in Clara's place! And such indecent haste! Then Johanna tried to excuse him, and to consider how his very unhappiness had led him to this step. She felt, indeed, as if she must arm herself with every possible argument in the telling which lay before her. As she walked along the streets to the station, the canals looked black, the clouds grey. People seemed to scrutinize her curiously; more than once she turned out of her way to avoid an acquaintance. But she would have given a great deal to have met Mathius, who alone, she reflected, could understand everything and everybody's point of view—even Madame Marken's. And she had a feeling at this moment as if she would very much like to know what might be Madame Marken's point of view.

CHAPTER XXII.

“We, ignorant of ourselves,
Beg often our own harms, which the wise powers
Deny us for our good—so find we profit
By losing of our prayers.”

HILVARDINE got out of the train, looking more like her old self than she had looked for some time. Yet the colour soon faded away, and Johanna, her secret hanging heavy on her heart, felt as if the telling it would need all her care and tenderness. She would wait until they were at home, until she had her quite alone. While she was determining this, Hilvardine, who had been speaking to a lady, came back.

“Do you mind walking back alone, Aunt Johanna?” she inquired. “Madame van Essen, who came from Amsterdam with me, has her carriage waiting, and has kindly offered to drive me home.”

“I am so sorry I cannot take you both,” said Madame van Essen, pleasantly. “As Hilvardine is not strong——”

“Thank you. It will be better for her.”

Johanna felt like the prisoner who has had a reprieve, as she watched the two drive off, Madame van Essen giving some directions to her coachman by which they were to make a little circuit. Then Johanna started to follow through the cold, damp air. Everything looked cheerless—the trees, the water, the grey cathedral tower in the distance, the people rolled up in comforters; nothing shone except the glittering brass milk-pails drawn along in their little carts by straining dogs. She shivered. Yet it was hard to walk fast, for she dreaded what

awaited her at home more than any miserable outside weather. And perhaps now Mathius would come round a corner, and this disposed her to linger.

Instead of Mathius there came a recollection—the letter from Frans!

She had left it in Hilvardine's blotting-book, having no thought but that they would return together. Now a sudden fear seized her. The girl would reach home, would go to her room, and some unhappy impulse might lead her to open her blotting-book. She would probably glance at the letter before discovering that it was not for her, and, once seeing the contents, would certainly read on. If Johanna had lingered before, she started off now as though wings were on her feet. She felt as if she should never forgive herself if Hilvardine met with this shock without a word of preparation to soften it. She had wasted already so much time; had allowed the carriage such a start that nothing but some unlooked-for delay on Madame van Essen's part would give her the chance of overtaking it. Neither right nor left would she look, but straight forward, counting the streets and the houses, and stumbling over the uneasy *klinkers* which make a cruelty of Dutch pavements. Suddenly somebody stepped directly in front of her and stopped her.

"Eh, eh, eh, Freule? And how is it with the town councillor, and with his daughter, and with you all, eh, eh, eh? Fine seasonable weather; not too warm, though, eh, eh? And what is the latest news in the town, eh? And is it true that the Pastor Alexander is going to Rotterdam, eh, eh, eh?"

It was Heer Ruisdijk, a deaf old gentleman who lived in the country, and, when he appeared in the town, was famous for the limpet-like pertinacity with which he clung to any one from whom the smallest particle of news

could be extracted. Johanna never knew how she made her escape; his "Eh, eh, eh?" sounded reproachfully in her ears as she hurried through a narrow lane, and past the old historic house—cleaned, alas! and beautified out of all picturesqueness—where, by a statue set high in the house walls, even the Protestant Netherlands commemorate the birthplace of a pope. Presently she saw their own house, its window-frames painted spotless white. When she rang the bell her hand trembled, and the instant the door was opened she ran up to Hilvardine's room.

There was no answer to her knock. She opened the door and pushed aside the curtain which hung inside. Then her heart sank. Hilvardine was standing before her table, immovable as a statue; in her hand the letter, in her eyes a mute expression which terrified Johanna. She, too, stood motionless for a moment; then she hurried forward and put her arms round the girl, but she pushed her away.

"What does this mean?" she said, in a harsh, changed voice.

"It is a letter to me," replied Johanna, with a certain emphasis, "from your father. I intended to have returned with you and to have told you. It is most unfortunate that you should have discovered it for yourself; still, my dear, you ought not to have read it."

She said this gently, thinking a little counter-blame might be useful. But the girl did not appear to have noticed the charge. She shivered, and looked down at the floor.

"It is like the things which haunted me when I was ill," she said slowly. "Am I ill again now?"

"No, indeed; I hope that is over," said Johanna, in a low voice.

"But I can't understand it," Hilvardine went on

piteously. "Madame Marken—Madame Marken! And it is such a little time since mamma died! Oh, Aunt Johanna, it must be a mistake!"

"He has been there a great deal of late. We might have thought."

"A year ago! And in a fortnight!"

"It is too soon," said Johanna sadly.

"And I was the person who persuaded him to go there, because I thought she opposed you!"

"There is no use in looking back," Johanna answered, with decision. "Let us look forward, and make the best of it."

There was a dead silence. Then Hilvardine bent forward.

"What shall you do?" she asked.

"Oh, I have not begun to reflect."

"I shall go out as a governess."

"That is admirable," Johanna said cheerfully. "And who will take care of the little Maria?"

But Hilvardine did not seem to have heard. Johanna put her arm round her.

"Come, get ready for dinner," she said; "we don't want to have you ill again."

The girl shrank back. "I can't see him yet."

"Your father? He will not come in, you will see. He will leave us this evening to digest his news."

"Madame Marken!"

"If it had been Madame any one else, it would have given you the same shock at first. You know that I am not an unprejudiced person in the matter. Well, I can say honestly that I believe Madame Marken is not a bad sort of woman. She will be kind to you, if you will let her."

"Kind!" said Hilvardine haughtily.

"Yes, kind," repeated Johanna, with emphasis, "as your father's wife."

"It is easy enough for you, Aunt Johanna!"

"Everything is easy for me," said the other girl wearily. "Come, dress."

She went away slowly, feeling as if she had not touched Hilvardine, or helped her in any way; her emotions did not swing freely enough, yet her heart ached for the girl, with all her mistakes and her intense passionate nature. It was almost a relief to find Constans bursting with mysterious hints, which she had some difficulty in restraining during dinner; though, indeed, Johanna, glancing at Betje, felt that she and all the world knew what had happened. When dinner was over, Hilvardine rushed away to the nursery. Constans hardly waited for the door to shut before she cried—

"Aunt Johanna, I wonder if you would ever guess what I have heard?"

"Is it about your father?"

"Oh, do you know?" exclaimed Constans, much disappointed. "Does Hilvardine know? Do you think it is quite true? Who can have told you? Betje declares it is certain, and that all the town knows it. Oh, I wonder what it will be like to have Madame Marken here, sitting at the top of the table, and all? Don't you think it will be very odd?"

"Very."

"But do tell me a little more. It is very hard that people should have known it all this time, and we not be told anything about it. If it hadn't been for Betje, I don't suppose I should have known anything now, unless, of course, you had told me."

"Your father wrote to me this afternoon. Till then, I was even more in the dark than all of you; and he

desired me to inform you all. We must let the boys know when they come in."

"Did papa write to you? I wonder why? How funny of him! The boys will be *so* astonished. I think I must watch and tell them. May I? or"—heroically—"had you better tell them yourself?"

"No; tell them, by all means. I am only too glad to be spared," said Johanna, opening her eyes. She thought Constans unfeeling, yet Hilvardine told her afterwards that in the middle of the night she heard her sobbing heavily. That was when she had realized it more; for the present, wonder was her prevailing sensation. It was something to be able to indulge it with scarcely a limit, and Johanna had not the heart to stop her, though she felt as if it would drive her mad if it went on much longer. The petty details on which she fixed her attention seemed of such infinite unimportance! Yet, after all, it was but a matter of degree. Man's mole-hills are the ant's mountains.

Hilvardine would not come down again that night. Johanna was glad she was spared the boys' indignation, which was at first somewhat strongly expressed in opinions anything but complimentary towards Madame Marken. Constans stood up loyally for her father. Now and then Johanna flung in a counsel of peace; but it was a stormy evening, Nicolas marching up and down the room, Hector thumping the table with his fists. Perhaps, in consequence of these outlets to agitation, both quieted down, though signs of stolid unfriendliness to Madame Marken remained. Johanna did not see Hilvardine again that night. She knocked at the door to ask if she had all she wanted, but received no invitation to enter, and felt it a relief. Then she went down again, having resolved to see Frans alone.

He was late in coming home, and changed colour when he saw his sister.

"Up still, Johanna?"

"I could not sleep until I had seen you. Dear Frans, you have startled us all, but I hope you have chosen for your own happiness."

He made a slight movement as if to repudiate that motive.

"How does Hilvardine take it?"

"You must not expect her to be reconciled all at once."

"I hope you have talked to her?" he asked anxiously. "I am particularly desirous that she should not drift into one of her strange, unsatisfactory moods. It would be exceedingly painful to Madame Marken."

Johanna was silent. Frans looked nervously at her, took up a book, and opened and shut it several times. He said at last—

"I am sure you understand what I mean."

"Perfectly," she said gravely. "But I hope Madame Marken is prepared for some painful things. You do not give them time to become used to the idea. A fortnight! Do you really mean that?"

"You might have read my letter carefully," he replied more crossly, "then you would have perceived my reasons. Heavens! don't you understand what trying work it is for a man to have all his neighbours chattering and gossiping. I would rather have it all over together and make an end of it."

There was a pause.

"*You* would rather, I dare say," she said softly. "I was thinking just then of the children."

"It will be no worse for them; it is only the first shock. They will be a great deal better off when they

have a—Madame Marken in the house,” said Frans, not very well remembering the gratitude he had talked about. But for that his sister did not care in the least.

“I hope she will be good to them.”

“She is the kindest, most sympathetic of women.”

“And you are happy, dear Frans?”

“Happy, no!” he declared, pulling himself up. “How can you suppose such a thing? I am a little less miserable.”

“Oh,” said Johanna gravely; “well, I hope that feeling will broaden. And as for me——”

“You will stay here?”

“Thank you, no. That I cannot do.”

“Then, you mean to marry?”

“That is ended.”

“It need not be. I saw Captain Wrangel in the town to-day. He asked if he might venture to call upon you, and I said I saw no reason why he should not. You might be very happy with him, Johanna.”

She did not even colour, but looked straight in his eyes, and said, “I shall never marry him.”

“What will you do, then?” asked the town councillor, walking up and down the room, and kicking over a footstool on his way.

“Do you remember my nurse Grietje? I have a fancy for going to see her on her farm in North Holland. It would be a change from this town life, of which I was never fond. And I have been thinking that it would not be a bad plan for you to let Hilvardine go with me for a while.”

Frans gave a sigh which sounded like one of relief, and stood still before his sister.

“Do you think she would go?” he asked.

“I am almost sure she would be glad. It would not

be very pleasant for her to be here while the marriage went on."

"And Heaven knows I shall be glad to have her away. That is not a bad idea of yours, Johanna. Constans could see after the children."

"Admirably. She is a better housekeeper than I am."

"Well, then, there is nothing in the way to hinder your plan, so far as I can see, but I'll tell you definitely to-morrow. When should you go?"

"When he has had Madame Marken's advice on the matter," reflected Johanna. Aloud she said, "As soon as I could hear from Madame Leeftang."

The town councillor looked at his watch, and ascertained that it was eleven o'clock. "That is all right, then," he said, in a cheerful voice. "Good-night, and thank you. Shall I put out the lights?"

Johanna's thoughts that night turned with an absolute longing to the green *polder* with its waving grass, its red buildings, and the great windmills all about. She tried to picture it to herself in different aspects. In summer, with the long grass starred with flowers or reddened with sorrel, the slow canals stealing through level meadows, the great sails moving like ghosts along the land, the silvery rain-laden clouds sweeping down; or in the evening, when overhead the last daylight lingered golden green, and the windmills stood up black, and all the earth was shrouded in dim half-lights, except the pale pools of water, reflecting the still luminous sky. By these images she tried to avoid dwelling on the general soreness of things about her; she tried also to set a boundary to the thoughts which would rush into the darkness of the future. Where should she go? What should she do? This year had brought with it so many new experiences and sensations, that she did not feel as if she could go

back to her life before it began with Madame van Alphen, though that lady had returned to Arnheim after a long absence, and had even said in one of her letters, "When Frans marries again, which he will do very shortly, you can come here." Now that it was proved true, Johanna found it hard to forgive this prophecy. Yet a strong feeling of justice made her acknowledge that Frans had not done ill for himself. Madame Marken was likely to be a careful wife, and act fairly by his children. Probably they would all take to her except Hilvardine; and for Hilvardine—well, if what had been suggested was true, Hilvardine's fate would need no pity. If Professor Mathius loved her, now was the time that he would come forward; and certainly now his suit would be doubly welcome. Johanna's thoughts repeated this conclusion with weary wakefulness. She said to herself more than once, how thankful she would be to see Hilvardine safe in such good hands! "If they love one another," said Johanna, turning one of her mountainous pillows with a sigh. She thought the night was hot, and was certain she wanted change, and to get away from the town with its associations. Then she, for the first time, recalled Frans' words about Arent, who was coming to see her to-morrow. Why was he coming? She felt a sudden hot anger in her heart towards him, different from anything which had ever been there before, yet it had scarcely kindled before it melted into shame. He had changed, and his change had brought about hers, but it seemed no less terrible on her part, no less disgraceful. So she tossed through the night, and fought with visions of sweet delusive happiness, as fair as they were mocking, and in the morning got up unrefreshed and heavy-eyed, with dread of the difficulties of the day.

Before breakfast she told Hilvardine of her plan,

and the girl jumped at the idea. It enabled her to meet her father with at least an outward show of friendliness, and things might have tided on peaceably if he, contrary to the advice he had received, had not proposed to her to go to see Madame Marken, whereupon she flatly refused. He left the house in hot anger.

"That's the beginning," said Hilvardine, turning to Johanna.

"Oh, certainly! Beginnings are generally very much what we like to make them."

"Well, you didn't expect me to go there?"

"I didn't. I thought that would be left for Constans and me."

Hilvardine looked at her intently. "Shall you really go?"

She was beginning to perceive that it sometimes cost Johanna as much to do a thing as it cost herself, yet that Johanna did it, while to her, that it was disagreeable was a sufficient reason for evading the doing.

Constans, on her part, was all eagerness. She wondered incessantly what Madame Marken would say, and whether she would kiss her; and she was particularly anxious to wear her best clothes on this visit of ceremony. Johanna had just sent her off for what was likely to prove a long preparation, when Captain Wrangel was announced.

Beforehand, she had dreaded the interview; when it came upon her, she was amazed at her own calmness. In any case she might have been able to simulate it, but in truth it was real—actual. Arent was hurried and awkward.

"It was good of you to see me, Johanna."

"Oh no," she said quietly; "there is no reason why I should not always be glad to see you. It is un-

expected, however, for I fancied you were employed again."

"I have been," he said, "but only on a home station. How long it is since I saw you!"

"The last time was on that day in the woods," she answered, still with the same composure, though she became a little pale, rather with the remembrance of past emotion than with its present stir.

He looked down. For an instant both were silent. There was a struggle going on in his mind. He knew he had been wrong, but to tell her so wanted more strength than he possessed. He said, with an effort—

"I heard a report in the town yesterday, and your brother told me it was true. It must affect your life, and change that determination of yours which stood between us——"

Johanna interrupted him. Her face had altered; a new expression crept into her eyes, a touch of scorn into her voice.

"Was that it?"

He reddened and hesitated. Then he said slowly—

"You have something to forgive."

"Yes," said the girl, gravely. "Do not let us speak of it."

They were both standing—she with her hands resting on the back of a chair. As she said this he made a quick, relieved step forward.

"Then, let us put it away like a bad dream," he said, with eagerness. "Let us take up the past as when I came back a year ago. Even if I am sent to a foreign station, I could leave you in a little home, I——"

She had her eyes upon his face, and had not removed them while he spoke. Under their gaze he sud-

denly faltered, and the words died away on his lips. He said involuntarily, in a low voice—

“Too late!”

“Yes, it is too late!” she said, looking sadly at him.

They were silent. Then he said, with a certain doggedness—

“But you loved me?”

“Yes. And I sometimes wonder at myself,” she said frankly; “I did not know that love could be so completely killed.”

He repeated the word “Killed!” but she went on without noticing.

“Other people might have had more patience; and, indeed, I may tell you that I often reproach myself. But reproaches will not bring it back. When your feelings changed—no, hear me out!—I thought and feared that my own would continue what they had been. I suffered intensely, and it seemed to me that, do what I would, the anguish must continue. But I found, by little and little, that it was a memory from which I suffered. When I thought of you, you began to lose your identity with that memory; now I have almost ceased to identify you with it at all. When I think of it and you, it is as of something past, gone, dead!”

She stopped. He was also silent. At last he said, in a low voice—

“Things come to life again.”

“Not the dead—not here. No, Arent; you are speaking to me on this subject for the last time.”

He muttered, “I was mad. Hear me one moment, Johanna! If I was fool enough to waver at—at that time, when I was angry and bitter with you, you have your revenge. If I have died away from you, your image has more than regained its hold on my heart.

The suffering which you have conquered is keen in me. Can't you give me some hope?"

"No," she said sadly. She was pained and amazed at her own coldness, yet she must be true to herself and him. Since that day at Beckhuizen, the agonies of pain she had suffered had been veritable death-pangs. Her love had seemed to wither and perish. She was sorry, pitiful, almost ashamed that not a pulse quickened, not a throb sent the blood more hotly through her veins. It was as she had said, and the dead could not come back to life.

"No," repeated Arent, looking at her; "I see."

He was standing near the window, and he turned away and stared out. Did he, glancing now at the leafless and bare trees, think of that summer day when he and she had stood beneath them, and he had recklessly flung away her love? Now what would he not have given to call it back? Call back our own actions? Oh, impotent heart! As well stand on the shore of some hurrying river, and call back the waters which have swept down to the sea!

He had moved away a few steps, when he returned.

"This marriage will be painful for you and for all."

"Most of all for Hilvardine," replied Johanna.

He looked hard at her; then said suddenly, "She never cared for me."

"No," Johanna said quietly—"she never cared." She almost thought his face fell. Perhaps in this collapse his vanity would have liked a less assured negative.

After he had left her, she stood for some time still at the window. A strong feeling of solitariness was upon her, though not one regret stole into her mind for this last decision. Nothing else, indeed, was open to her; but, having been made, it seemed to leave her rather

more stranded than before. Frans would soon be lost in his new interests, Hilvardine would marry Mathius, and who was left for her? Perhaps they would spare her the little Maria. Perhaps she might go to the *Diaconessehuis*, and devote herself to nursing the sick. But, plan as she might, nothing seemed to satisfy her heart, and she awoke with a start when Constans came in, fully caparisoned, and eager to impress Madame Marken with her best clothes.

Thinking of it afterwards, Johanna acknowledged that Madame Marken showed great tact in the interview. It seemed as if she were trying to avoid pushing them or herself into a different position all at once. It was only as they were coming away, when Constans had gone to examine a bullfinch in the next room, that she spoke at all freely.

"Don't try to drive Hilvardine in here," she said; "I have been scolding your brother for attempting it. Of course, she hates me just now. I should be the same if I were in her place. She will come round by-and-by."

"And you are not afraid of your task?" exclaimed Johanna involuntarily.

"I should have preferred a husband without any children, certainly, if that is what you mean," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "But what will you? They don't grow on blackberry bushes. To tell you the truth, however, I am more afraid of Constans' virtues than of Hilvardine's tempers. They are less in my way. Oh, Hilvardine and I shall get on very well, as I told you before."

"I hope she may soon marry," said Johanna, who did not share that confidence.

"Do you think so? I don't. At any rate, I don't see the man at present."

This surprised the other slightly, for Madame Marken had the reputation of pouncing with extraordinary discernment on an attachment; she could only suppose she had been too much taken up with her own private concerns to have had time to look about her.

Madame Marken went on, "I am sorry you are going—still——"

"Oh, it is best; I don't really belong to the household," said Johanna, with a smile.

"And you are likely to have one of your own soon."

"Not by marriage, if that is what you mean."

"Yes, that is what I meant. Well, we shall see."

She nodded her head, and looked sagacious. Johanna did not think it worth while to undeceive her farther. Frans would tell her when they had time to talk about anything but their own concerns. Besides, Constans was here again, and they went away. Constans was critical, but, on the whole, favourable. She rushed up to Hilvardine as soon as they reached the house, and would have poured forth a minute account of the visit but that her sister stopped her, and declined to hear. It was necessary to retire to Betje instead.

All that day and the next, which was Sunday, they heard nothing of Mathius, whose visits had ceased with an extraordinary abruptness. Johanna pitied Hilvardine; she felt sure that she pitied her with all her heart, for the girl's eyes were heavy with expectation, and she would not allow herself to find out how much disappointment was mixed with her own astonishment. At dinner she asked her brother what he knew of him.

"The professor? Oh, he is away somewhere; I can't recollect where. I remember now that when I met him in the street three or four days ago, he desired me to mention his going to one or the other of you. Did I

not? With so many important things in my mind, the truth must be that it escaped my memory."

"Then, he has gone?"

"Yes, he has gone; certainly he has gone."

"When does he come back, Frans?" asked Johanna, who was peeling an orange for Luce.

"If he said, I have forgotten."

Johanna wondered whether Hilvardine would still be of the same mind as to going. She showed, however, no wish for any postponement; indeed, was eager for Grietje's letter. It came, full of welcoming delight, and a week later the two were on their way to the northern farm.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Broad sweep of sky, and swiftly flying clouds,
Above a long low level meadow land,
Snatched from the sea, and held in fearful fief."

"HILVARDINE, are you alive?"

"There hasn't been half an hour all the night through in which I have had any doubt on the subject," answered a doleful voice. "Of all terrible inventions, commend me to a box-bed! Shall we get used to them, or be suffocated first?"

"I am going to get up."

"To get down, you mean. You must certainly send for a ladder. Why is this perilous height added to our other dangers?"

"To give you a chance of escape from drowning. Did you not hear Grietje talking about it last night?" asked Johanna coolly.

"If I did I was too sleepy to attend. I believe I did get a little sleep at first. What did she say?"

"Thirty years ago this *polder* was sea, and they are obliged to be extremely careful and watchful of their dykes."

"A large choice of deaths is offered to us, it seems," sighed Hilvardine. "Imagine lying here and seeing the water bubble up!"

Johanna meanwhile had drawn aside the curtains of the window, and uttered an exclamation.

"Is it so pretty?" asked Hilvardine lazily.

"I don't know whether it is pretty, but it is delightful; it is all so large and open. Now I look at it more, it is chiefly sky, but such a sky!"

"And sea?"

"Not in sight, but dunes towards the south, and just the great level meadows I have been dreaming about. It is of no use; a town is like a prison. Come, make haste, and let us go out."

Johanna was another person; the keen bracing air seemed to give her new strength, the wide fresh expanse to fill her with a sense of freedom. She delighted in everything: in the exquisitely clean old farmhouse, with its blue tiles, its shining pots and pans, its china, its spotless floors and tables and chairs—in everything, in fact, except the box-bed in the wall, and even this she learned to disregard when she came to it with a wholesome fatigue, and a large supply of fresh air by day to fight the want of it at night; besides, after their first experience, they took care to have the window a little open all night.

And what seemed to Johanna the best of all things, she having had little of late of petting or mothering, was the fuss which Madame Leeftang, her Grietje, made over

her. She was a tall woman, with an intelligent plain face; dark hair, closely smoothed back under a snowy lace cap, adorned, on a line with the eyebrows, with large spiral projecting gold ornaments. On Sundays, or on market-days when she went off with the cheeses to Alkmaar, the cap was surmounted by an exceedingly smart bonnet, bedecked with flowers and gaudy ribbons—a bonnet which went up at the top of the crown, and retreated still more in its towering front, so that it might be described in shape as a compressed half-moon. Carried in this, she mounted a large cart with four great blue wheels, open behind, and boasting high sides, peaked at the back. These sides, painted brown outside and blue in, were headed by a carved device in blue, green, and yellow, and a great blue sickle-shaped wooden hook in front was the means by which it was attached to the harness; the golden cheeses were packed in shining rows, and away they went towards Alkmaar.

Her husband was a small man, of lower intelligence than his wife, slow to move and slow to act, but as tenacious as a bull-dog. Johanna saw little of him, for he was out of doors all day long, and the two girls had their meals alone in the little room which had been set apart for them, and which was loyally hung round with portraits of the House of Orange. When the men came in, they left their sabots in a little heap outside the door, for fear of soiling the cleanliness of the floor. The girls used to hear them of an evening, sitting round the fireplace, where they smoked their pipes and talked in slow gutturals of the condition of the crops, or the question of the dykes.

“Is there any fear?” asked Johanna one evening of Madame Leeftang, when she had brought in her knitting for a little chat.

"Fear?" she repeated, smiling and showing her white teeth. "Eh, mejufvrouw, there is always a certain amount of fear. When the land has stolen a piece from the sea, the sea is like other folk and tries hard to get it back again. At times Pieter grows uneasy. The dykes may be eaten away almost before you know it, and he does not think the *dijkgraaf* of our district quite careful enough. But I tell him that we are in better hands than the *dijkgraaf*'s. When you have lived in the midst of these alarms for so many years, to tell the truth, you become used to them."

"Your husband says this is a dangerous time of year."

"The spring and autumn winds are always the worst," said Grietje calmly. "But it is a great while since there has been a bad inundation. There's my sister living on the next *polder*, she's a weak-spirited woman, and, poor thing! she can't sleep on wild nights for fancying she hears the rush of the sea."

"Grietje, I am weak-spirited too; I feel sure I shall lie awake."

"Mejufvrouw, what is the use? Though, perhaps, I should have warned you before you came. I don't think about it, and so it never struck me."

"No," said Johanna, considering. "I don't suppose there is any real danger, and I believe I rather like the sensation of risk."

She spoke rightly. The vague possibility of a certain ill-defined and mysterious peril seems to have a peculiar fascination for well-balanced natures, which we might rather expect to be tied down to more strict and prosaic emotions. Perhaps some impulse of the sort is required to stir their imaginative powers, and, once stirred, they are conscious of experiencing a new though fearful delight. Hilvardine's fancies were of a more active habit than Johanna's, yet they never pictured the on-

coming sweep of water with the same vivid force. Johanna was not sure that she was right in allowing Hilvardine to remain there. She talked to her, and was laughed at; and she wrote to Frans, and received a letter treating her fears as absurd. After this she spoke to some of the men on the farm, and to a neighbour or two. Pieter Leeftang had the character of an alarmist; nobody else seemed to think there was more than ordinary danger, such as attends high tides and long-continued gales from a particular quarter. After all, it would have seemed very foolish to have run away from what the people about her were exposed to all the year round.

Everything else she found charming—house, dogs, pigeons, and the pretty black and white cows in their stable, where the same marvellous cleanliness prevailed. She was glad to be there a little before the time came for turning them out in the pastures; but they were soon to go, for the season was extraordinarily mild, and the meadows had a fine thick coating of grass to offer. Madame Leeftang and her maids were busy overlooking the coverings which the cows would wear when first sent out, some of them until quite the summer heats. Sometimes Johanna and Hilvardine would walk for a mile or two along the roads, on the top of the inland dykes, past hamlets of queer little dwellings, with painted wooden fronts, green or brown; sometimes they went to the windmills, of which there were two or three on the farm, and watched the wood-sawing or the corn-grinding. Leeuw and Wolf, the two leading dogs at the farm, accompanied them. One or two of the others had shown a desire to be admitted to this privilege, but their comrades declined to allow it; they fell upon them tooth and nail, and drove them ignominiously into retirement.

It was a land of windmills: of all colours—green,

red, brown; of all shapes, and of all variety of sails. They had names to distinguish them, the Green Huntsman, Home and Fatherland, etc., and were the objects of much care and pride. Hilvardine liked to go down to the windmills better than anywhere else here on the *polder*. It was not so delightful to her as to Johanna; the great expanse, the solitude, oppressed her. While to the other they seemed to give the relief she needed, to Hilvardine they caused an inexpressible melancholy. She was glad to get away from the town, which was full of painful association, and she was smarting with indignation against her father; but hers was a nature which needed the constant touch of other natures. Still—life had no charm for her, and the country seemed as stagnant as a green pool. To feel that she had come here by her own choice was not likely to chase away her self-discontent, and though she had made some heroic efforts to shake off too-haunting thoughts of Mathius, she could scarcely keep these thoughts always at bay, or cease to dream dreams in which his displeasure had turned to pity, and all the winter of her unhappiness blossomed into joy. She could not quite believe that he did not love her.

Sometimes Hilvardine would not be induced to stir out, then Johanna and the dogs made still longer expeditions. Once she reached the dunes, those Dutch Alps which really, in the universal level, produce a mountainous effect, so varied are their curving lines. These great sandy banks, matted with tough grass, against which the sea dashes itself in vain, are the natural defenders of Holland; the nearer the dykes can be made to resemble them, the better. When Johanna reached them, a shore wind was blowing strongly, and the grey sea was sheeted with foam. A few fishing-

boats, heavy lumbering craft, were plunging along at a safe distance from land; sea-birds skimmed the waves; the strong salt exhilarating wind whirled the fine sand of the dunes here and there. With the Dutch there is always a proud feeling of conflict with the sea; Johanna felt that consciousness stir in her heart as she looked forward over the rolling waters, and back at the flat green fields, all of which, within her sight, had been dragged from the very bowels of the enemy, and lay low below the level of the waters.

Another day they drove to Alkmaar, not in the blue and brown cart, which had as much as it could carry of cheeses for a load, but in a scarcely less primitive conveyance, drawn by a great white horse, and driven by one of the farm men. It was market—cheese market—day. The gales had lulled, the sun shone brilliantly, and when the quaint old town was reached, it was full of pictures, of light, of sharp colouring. The weighing-house, round which the chief business of the day concentrates itself, is one of those beautiful buildings in which time and colour get the better of architecture. There are all sorts of curls and flamboyant monstrosities about it, and each one is full of delight; the old soft red brick and the grey stones harmonize every fault into delicious beauty. Under the wooden projections towards its base a busy scene goes on. The carts empty their golden cheeses into the weighing-machines; they are poured into hand-barrows, caught up by two porters, and trotted off at an inexorable swing, to which everything in the town has to give way, to the picturesque canal, which stretches along in front. Nothing can be more bright, more animated. The canal is crammed with great barges, brilliant with colour, and with ever-increasing piles of yellow cheeses; the cheeses are oiled, and shine;

men are tumbling them into troughs, catching them in their hands, trundling them into the holds. All the world would seem golden but that there are other bright patches—green rudders, red chimneys—on the boats, which have their great fish-like *zwaards* drawn up idly by their sides; while everywhere, when between the barges you catch a glimpse of water, you see lovely luminous reflections, light is flung up at you again, and all the joy of colour is at play.

The life and stir of the place, the crossing and re-crossing of the busy bridges between the old houses with their step-like gable fronts, and the hurry and excitement caused by the perpetual rush of the cheese-porters, with their gay, differently coloured hats, was delight to Hilvardine after ten days on the quiet *polder*. Not the picturesqueness, but the people caused the charm.

“What would you not give to go home again?” asked Johanna, gaily. “My dear, you prefer *klinkers* to grass.”

“There are *klinkers* on dykes,” retorted Hilvardine. “But you are quite right. I always have lived in a town, and I like it best. As to going home, it is home no longer; and Constans writes as if she were rather enjoying it all. I can hardly read Constans’ letter. Why don’t you speak? Why don’t you say it is my own bringing about?”

“Because I don’t quite think that,” said Johanna, cheerfully. “I’ve a greater respect for Madame Marken’s intellect. Depend upon it, she would carry out her intentions without any need of you or me.”

“Do you think so?” said the girl, with eagerness.

“I haven’t the shadow of a doubt.”

“That is some comfort,” said Hilvardine, with a sigh; “but it makes her the more horrid.”

"I don't think she wishes to do badly by you all."

They were strolling idly along one of the old streets, which yet, like the rest of Holland, vigorously disclaimed all idea of age, and was as young as paint and plaister could make it. Every now and then they stopped on a bridge and looked round them, perhaps back at the old weighing-house, the great barges, the spirited colouring. They were away from the cheeses, but little knots of people clustered here and there about some other buyings and sellings, so that a pleasant cheerful stir was present.

"Oh, do badly!" repeated Hilvardine, with a short laugh. "Do you really suppose it will ever be possible to live with her?"

"I cannot see any other course open for you. Let us talk it quietly over. Where could you go?"

"Anywhere," cried the girl impetuously.

"Anywhere is so vague!—and everywhere wants money. I have too little of my own to be able to take you to live with me, even if you liked that. And I don't know that you would like it."

"I don't know either." She said this with a frank laugh. "I am not a true Dutchwoman like you, Aunt Johanna. I hate housekeeping, and having to be punctual and orderly. We have been fire and water already sometimes in the house, although you have always tried to be kind."

Johanna started. It was the very simile Madame Marken had applied to them, and she knew it was true.

"Well, then?" she asked slowly.

Hilvardine walked on impatiently a few steps. "Oh, I don't know," she said. "Don't you think it is a pity I didn't die when I was so ill?"

"Do you think so yourself?"

"It would have saved many perplexities," she persisted. Johanna was silent, and the girl suddenly turned to her with a bright flash of tears in her eyes. "I'm bad enough, but not so bad as that. But you don't know how that dreadful night is always before me, and how I hear it all over again—the crash and the confusion, and Minna's cries; and—that must be fancy, but I always, always seem to hear a dull horrible thud. If you had seen the mark!"

She was leaning over a bridge; she covered her face with her hands. Johanna could only murmur words of sympathy. Such outbursts from Hilvardine were rare; here a very nothing had brought it about. She made one or two struggles to recover her composure.

"You can't think what the feeling of having been the cause is like," she went on slowly. "It is a great heavy weight always lying like lead. I talk and laugh, and you think me heartless——"

"No, never!"

"Oh, you must. One has to be oneself to know what one feels. I often think I am heartless myself, but it is because my heart seems a stone. If it had not been for me——"

"But you are carrying that too far," said Johanna firmly. "No doubt you acted wrongly, but they were his own passions which took him those lengths."

"If I had driven back with him!"

"You would only have put yourself more than ever in his power. Don't regret *that*."

The girl looked heavily at her, but there was a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

"There is one thing with you, Aunt Johanna," she said, "you wouldn't say what you didn't——" As she spoke she started. Her eyes had been fixed on a little

cross street; from one of the houses in this street a gentleman had come out and walked rapidly away.

"What is the matter?" asked Johanna wonderingly, turning to look at what had caused Hilvardine's start. The girl recovered herself quickly, but was pale.

"It must have been fancy; it is impossible to have been he."

"He? Who?"

"Oh, I was surprised for the moment," said Hilvardine, lightly. "Of course it could not have been, but some one in Alkmaar is exactly like the professor."

"That isn't wonderful. He has a brother here."

Johanna spoke in the same tone as Hilvardine. No one would have supposed that the fact had been in her mind ever since she had reached Alkmaar.

"Has he? What does he do?"

"I believe he is an engineer, and connected with the *waterstaat*."

"It must be a twin brother, then," remarked Hilvardine.

Neither of them alluded again to the subject. It seemed, however, to have put an end to Hilvardine's confidence; she became silent and thoughtful.

Going home, Nicolas, the farm servant, was communicative about the dykes. There had been some talk on the subject in Alkmaar that day. Johanna gathered that though Pieter Leeftang was considered an alarmist, there were others who shared his apprehensions. Nicolas himself was inclined to treat it in a fatalistic spirit.

"It is the same every year," he said, "and here we are still, and here we shall be, unless it is intended that we should be drowned."

"But, Nicolas," said Johanna, uneasily, "surely it is very rare to hear of a *polder* being submerged?"

"Eh, rare? Yes," said he; "but it happens—it happens. In '73, not so long ago, the *polder* of Borselen went. Such a good farm as it was, and beautiful cows."

"Oh, how dreadful! But what causes it?"

"Sometimes the dykes get eaten out, *mejufvrouw*; sometimes it is a broken sluice-gate does the mischief, but mostly it's the tides rising over the dykes."

"And that requires a westerly gale. Look how fine it is, Nicolas. Spring is here, and the storms are over."

"Ye—es," said Nicolas, replacing his pipe in his mouth, and turning his large head from side to side, so as to gaze round the horizon; "ye—es," he repeated.

Some agreements are more exasperating than contradictions; this of Nicolas belonged to that class. He said "Yes," but he threw so much doubt into the word that it might just as well have been "No." Nevertheless, with the sun shining, and signs of spring gently stirring everywhere, and its hopefulness felt where it has as great an influence as in the trees themselves—in young hearts—it was easier to set Nicolas down as a croaker than to believe that the lightly dappled and feathery clouds pointed to storm. Hilvardine laughed out merrily. With one of her swift changes, she seemed to have thrown off the gloom of an hour ago; she made whimsical remarks, and talked incessantly. They jogged along, Nicolas smoking his pipe, and now and then bestowing some information upon them, generally relating to the dykes. Once he took out his pipe, and stretched it in the direction of one of the red hamlets far away.

"Do you see that village, *mejufvrouw*? Well, there every man, woman, and child is in the service of the dykes. They are employed by the *waterstaat*."

"Then we are well looked after."

"Some folks say not," said Nicolas, replacing his

pipe. "But then, some folks are never satisfied, and others want to have the thing in their own hands. What has been will be. That's what I say."

"What is, is what God ordains," said Johanna gently. "But we have to do our best all the same."

"That's what most won't do," said Nicolas, who had evidently an excellent power of applying moral reflections to any one rather than himself.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"And the night wind rising, hark!"

RAIN came the next day, and even Johanna could not go much beyond the farm. She fed the poultry in the brick paved yard, and visited what animals there were; but the cows had been turned out the day before, the season was so mild, and there was not much to be done in that way. Hilvardine was out of spirits; she insisted upon hearing about everything which happened at home, and yet Constans' letters caused her a perpetual fret. Johanna began to think that bringing her away had been a mistake.

Driven in at last by the rain, Johanna betook herself to the kitchen, and set to work to make some cakes for tea, while Madame Leeftang was engaged on more serious operations. The kitchen was a pleasant place, for though the red-roofed house was not old, the Leeftangs had brought old things with them, and tiles and shining brass and shining wood, with the exquisite spotlessness of everything, made it very attractive. Grietje, above all things, enjoyed a chat with her nursling when nobody else was by.

"And when are you going to choose a husband for yourself, mejufvrouw?" she inquired.

"When I can find any one I like as well as you like Pieter."

"That won't content you," said Madame Leeftang, with a solid comfortable laugh as she stirred a saucepan. "Yet it might, if you would believe it."

"Oh, I think you are as happy as the day is long, Grietje, and have your own way into the bargain."

"Not when Pieter's got one of his own. That isn't always, you must understand, for mostly he just goes along where one takes him, because it's less trouble, and he doesn't mind. But when once an idea comes into his head that there's something he should do, do it he will, and all the king's officers wouldn't turn him. You never knew such an obstinate man in your life!"

"Perhaps he doesn't very often get these ideas," Johanna suggested, laughing.

"So, so. He's got one now about the dykes and our *dijkgraaf*, and off he must tramp, rain or no rain, to see one of the engineers."

"Do you know his name?" asked Johanna carelessly.

Madame Leeftang shook her head, and made a sudden descent upon her salt-box, which did not look as bright as pleased her.

"No—I don't attend to him when he gets a bee buzzing in his brain. I've got to put up with it, but I don't let it buzz in mine, or the same house wouldn't hold us so comfortably as it does. No, I don't always have my own way. There's my sister, who looks as if a calf a week old would knock her over, *she's* the one for that. She just cries and looks injured, and Cornelius is ready to go down on his knees and beg her to be pleased again. I might cry my eyes out before Pieter did any-

thing of the sort. But I wouldn't change," she ended, with a laugh.

"Well, I hope the *waterstaat* people will attend to Pieter."

"Oh, the *dijkgraaf* is a solid man. They won't like to offend him. Mejufrvrouw, you make better cakes than when you were a little girl, and teased the life out of me."

Later on she came up to tell Johanna that her husband had come back.

"What do they say?" asked Johanna.

"The gentleman he wanted to see was away at Amsterdam till to-night, and there was only a young fellow gabbling like a turkey-cock. But Pieter left a message, which he says will bring the gentleman over to-morrow."

"What gentleman?" asked Hilvardine, when she had gone.

"Some engineer at Alkmaar."

"The professor's double, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

Hilvardine looked doubtfully at her. "What do you mean? Do you know?"

"No more than you do. I only added a 'perhaps' to your own suggestion."

The girl turned away her head. Then she said slowly, "I thought possibly you might have heard from the professor?"

Johanna hated herself for the leap her heart gave. She drove it down, and said as kindly as she could, "I suspect of the two you are the most likely to have a letter. He must have been very busy."

Hilvardine got up and walked to the window. The rain was lashing against it, the whole aspect of the country was inexpressibly dreary; a leaden-coloured cloud blurred

all the crisp colours of the horizon. She played on the glass with her fingers, and said in a low voice—

“He is not likely to write to me. He would never forget what—what we talked about yesterday.”

“I don’t think he is such a severe judge,” Johanna answered gently.

“Oh yes, he is. All you good people are hard,” retorted the girl, with bitterness.

Johanna did not know what to say. It was not for her to declare that she believed Mathius to be attached to Hilvardine; besides, her mind swayed backwards and forwards—she did not know what she believed. The clearest thought she had arrived at on the subject was that by-and-by, when Hilvardine’s first resentment was over, she would go home, and be thrown as usual a good deal in the way of the professor. Then the charm which she undoubtedly had the power of exercising would be at work, and if there had been things of which he disapproved he would forget and forgive; he would, moreover, be moved by compassion for the girl’s position, and they would eventually marry. Whether happiness would come of it, she was not so sure: happiness is a shy flower, and does not always bloom when it is looked for. So far as that, however, she could not look. And meanwhile she, in some quiet country spot, would hear and do her best to be glad. She felt it hard, though perhaps as well, that she should not see Mathius again, for they had been good friends, and might always preserve a regard for one another. She fancied he would be a little sorry to go back and find her gone; and she had made up her mind not to return. Frans expected her, but now that she was away she felt as if she need not seek fresh pain. From one cause and another a good

deal had come round her in the past year; there were sore places in her heart which to the end of life would shrink from the lightest touch, try to harden them as she might. All her thoughts of Arent were sore. In spite of her quiet, sensible, practical ways, she idealized those she loved, and disappointment carried with it a most bitter pang.

It was a wild night. Before they went to bed, Johanna, hearing the men go out, descended to the kitchen for some last words with Grietje. It struck her that she looked pale and worried.

"Well," she acknowledged, "Pieter talks till he frightens one. He has had the cows driven farther away, and put another dyke between them and the water. Now he has gone out for a last look."

"Is it a high tide?" asked Johanna, with alarm.

"Yes, mejufvrouw," said Madame Leeftang gravely. "But there have been many high tides this winter, and winds as strong——"

She stopped, for as she spoke there came a rush so tremendous that the house seemed to shake.

"It is terrible!" said Johanna.

"I am as bad as my sister," said Madame Leeftang, trying to smile. "I think it must be the having you and Mejufvrouw Hilvardine here that makes me nervous, and Pieter going on as he does. Mostly I don't notice the wind roaring, unless it is to think of the poor souls out on the waters. They will have a bad night of it to-night."

"I will sit with you until your husband comes in," Johanna said, taking up some knitting that lay on the snowy table. "One can hardly sleep in such a racket."

So they sat on together, now and then speaking a

little softly of old days and Johanna's father and mother; but more often still, and listening with awe to the great hurly-burly of the storm, which swept straight in from the sea, laden with strange cries and wails that sounded like human voices. When Pieter came in, he was so wet that his wife busied herself at once in getting dry things. He was, moreover, in his most uncommunicative mood, but Johanna gathered that his neighbours were disposed to pooh-pooh his fears, and to believe the *dijkgraaf* a capable overseer.

"'Tis but one spot," grunted Pieter to his wife, when Johanna had left them; "that's their cry, as if one spot were not enough! 'Twill be a good thing if I'm the fool, and they the wise folk."

"That you'll never believe, Pieter," said Madame Leeftang briskly. In her heart she was consoled by the opinion of the majority. "Come, you've done all you can, and the engineer will be over to-morrow—go to bed and be quiet. The dyke has weathered worse storms."

She was staggered when her husband announced his intention of sitting up. It made her think more seriously of the situation than she yet had done. If the sea broke in, it was a matter of life and death; not many chances of life, moreover, to weigh against that other likelihood. Between them and the dangerous bit of the coast—in Pieter's opinion—there was a smaller cross dyke, which might serve in some slight degree to break the force of the enemy—at any rate, perhaps hold it at bay for a breathing space; but it was a very frail hope. It added to her disturbance when her husband called the dogs into the kitchen.

"Never mind the floor, wife," he said; "the poor beasts shall have the same chance with us all." The men had gone down to the mills.

He was too uneasy to remain still, every now and then opening the door—letting in a wild turmoil of wind and rain—and, going round to a sheltered angle of the house, straining his hearing to catch any more ominous and angry roar. Madame Leeftang, on her part, went to the rooms where her farm servants slept, and roused them to a short watchfulness, but they were too sleepy to stay awake long. Then she went cautiously upstairs. Johanna was standing at her door.

“Hilvardine is asleep,” she said. “Ought I to awaken her? Shall we come downstairs? It is awful!”

“Mejufvrouw, if the sea comes, it will come too quickly for us to escape. It will be upstairs that we shall all come, and perhaps—the house is a little higher than the land on that side—perhaps we may be spared till help reaches us. But I hope and pray that Pieter may be over fearful. The neighbours should know as well as he, and they are not near so anxious. If you and the young lady were not here, I don’t believe I should attend to him, but it makes one feel as one would if one had children in the house, and that’s the truth.”

“The darkness—that is so terrible!” said Johanna, with a shudder.

“The nights are not long, though,” Grietje replied.

She was calmer, she had faced the situation more often. She went quietly into the room, and stood holding back the blind, staring out into the raging blackness of the storm. Johanna followed her and looked over her shoulder. Neither could see anything, but there seemed a sort of satisfaction in so gazing, and in being together. After a time Madame Leeftang drew back.

“I hear my husband,” she said—“I must go down. If there is anything to know you shall know it, but what can it be?”

Later on, it was Johanna who went down to her, hearing the door slam again. As she reached the foot of the stairs she thought what a picture of peace it looked, and how strangely the haunting fear was out of keeping with appearances. The pleasant kitchen, in which the stove was still burning, the shining crockery, the flame of the candles reflected everywhere on bright copper or tiles, the air of comfortable plenty about. The dogs, disturbed by the unusual promotion to these quarters, had with the exception of old Leeuw, a great yellow and white fellow, stretched themselves at last before the stove and slept. Leeuw, head bent, and in an attitude of watchful attention, was seated by the door through which the master had gone out. Grietje herself sat at the table, the candles pulled close to her, and the great family Bible, with its quaint prints, spread before her. Sometimes she dozed a little, then woke with a start and read another verse. The light fell on her white cap with its gold ornaments; on her keen sensible features and the fine lines of her face, on which not one unkindly impression was marked. Johanna herself, as she stood for a moment to look, brought a pleasant bit of youth into the picture. Madame Leeffang presently lifted her head with a smile.

“Still watching, mejufvrouw? And I have had a little nap or two. Now I shall make you some tea, and cut some bread and butter.”

The night passed in this fashion. Hilvardine slept; Pieter Leeffang went in and out, smoked his great pipe, and said little; sometimes Johanna and Grietje read a verse of the old Bible, and talked it over with strong simple faith—sometimes they dozed off in their chairs, their eyes by this time heavy with sleep; always outside there was the same whirl and rush and tempest of wind

and rain, the same distant roar of the great waves. When Grietje, pulling back the blind, showed the first pallid lightening of the wild sky, it seemed to Johanna that she had never known so welcome a sight. The two women stood hand-in-hand, and watched the light growing up in spite of the rush of driven clouds, which were, as it seemed, hurled against it by some unseen power; then suddenly, moved by one impulse, they turned and kissed each other, and thanked God.

It was the darkness, they said—the darkness which made it so terrible.

The candles were out, the light had strengthened, when Pieter came in again, followed by the great dog, who this time had gained his desire of going out with his master. Morning, too, had brought to him more hope; he thought the wind was certainly abating. If the time of high tide were once passed——

“And that is near?” asked his wife.

“In half an hour.”

“Oh, come,” she said cheerfully, “that will soon be over.”

“It is not over yet,” he said.

His manner was still grave, but Johanna’s heart opened itself freely to comfortable hope. She ran upstairs at once, kissed Hilvardine, who had awakened, and told her the good news.

“You have been up all night!” exclaimed the girl, in amazement. “Has there really been danger?”

“Something like it, I suppose. But that is just the question between Pieter Leeftang and his neighbours. I hope the neighbours are right.”

“Lie down now, at any rate.”

“When the half-hour is past. I shall finish my watch.”

"Yes, that is like you," said Hilvardine, with a yawn. "There is such an orderly instinct in your mind that it insists on rounding off everything, even a wakeful night."

Johanna laughed. She knew that the girl was right. Then she went to the window and pulled back the curtain. Their room did not command the side where the danger lay, but it was impossible, now that grey daylight was there, to avoid gazing in the direction of the sea. She heard Pieter's heavy footsteps coming upstairs, and lumbering into an unused room which looked directly northwest, and gathered from this that his uneasiness was not at an end. Presently Grietje came up and joined him. The sound of their voices was clearly audible to the girls, though they could not distinguish any words. Hilvardine, moved by some impulse, got up and began to dress herself. Another sound seemed suddenly to become strangely distinct—the ticking of the large kitchen clock. Whether it were that a measure of time had been vividly impressed on her mind, or whether the tremendous roar of the wind had so far abated as to allow her once more to be conscious of lower sounds, certain it is that this slow, steady, inexorable ticking became at last almost unendurable to Johanna. Each sound fell like the stroke of a hammer upon her brain, and it appeared to her that each dragged more slowly than the last. She pressed her hands over her ears and tried to shut them out, ashamed of herself all the time; but whether she heard them or not, she could not for a moment become unconscious of the heavy dragging strokes. The wind itself was not so terrible. By-and-by Hilvardine came and stood by her side, looking out.

"Oh, the gale is certainly lessening," she said in a convinced tone.

The sky indeed, though heavily loaded, was breaking into separate clouds, and taking grey gradations instead of hanging in a heavy dense mass; the wind came rather in squalls than in the steady fearful pressure of the last few hours—squalls which were fierce enough at one moment, but gave promise of relief the next. All the horizon was blurred and misty; the line of the dunes blotted out by what was doubtless a cloud of spray mixed with rain, the grass-lands indistinct and desolate-looking as a desert. The windmills, the only things which stood up and above the general flatness, gave an indescribable air of wildness to the scene; they seemed to be flinging out appealing arms in all directions, as though protesting against this battering and turmoil of the powers of the air. Suddenly the clock struck the half-hour. Johanna clasped her hands; she could hear the voices in the next room raised. In a few minutes Grietje came and looked in at the door.

“Now you must lie down and sleep, mejufvrouw,” she said, in her brisk comfortable voice. “Even Pieter himself is satisfied, for the tide turned a quarter of an hour ago, and I am sure I wouldn’t for anything let my sister know that we had been up all night like this. I doubt if she’s ever been so foolish hers——”

The words were never finished. With a cry, hoarse and terrible, Pieter sprang out upon them, and rushed down the stairs.

“Stay where you are!”

That was all he said, but they knew what it meant. The dyke had given way, and they were at the mercy of the sea.

CHAPTER XXV.

“Each minute threatens life or death.”

FOR one moment they looked blankly at each other with the terror of death in their eyes; then Hilvardine cried out and clung to Johanna. As for Madame Lee-flang, in spite of her husband's words, she was down the stairs after him. They heard her cries to the girls. Johanna would have followed, but that she could not extricate herself from Hilvardine, and her next thought warned her that the worst thing she could do would be to block the narrow staircase. She half led, half dragged, Hilvardine into the room from which Pieter had just rushed; but when she gazed out and saw the dreadful reality, her heart seemed to turn to stone.

For a great seething mass of yellow tumbling waters already covered the green *polder* of a few minutes ago, and was sweeping, spreading, with inconceivable rapidity. Only the slight rise of the ground on which the farm stood had preserved it from being already surrounded, and this was but a check and not a barrier. The flood came on like relentless doom—too fast for Johanna's first wild idea of escape. Long before they reached the next dyke they would be swallowed up. Even now, seeing how close it was, a wild agony of horror seized her lest those still downstairs should be caught. She disengaged herself by a wrench from Hilvardine's convulsive grasp, and flew once more to the head of the stairs. Two of the servants, dazed and pale, had reached the top; another was stumbling up, uttering cries of terror. Johanna, in her turn, cried out wildly—

"Grietje, come up—come up! It is close!"

Pieter it was, however, who first appeared, his face white as death, his arm laden with household goods.

"Call up the dogs," he cried, as he flung his burdens on the ground and clattered down again.

Johanna would have rushed after him in pursuit of Grietje, but the next moment she saw her face appearing. She was quite calm, and had filled the skirt of her dress with the great picture-Bible and a quantity of blue china.

"It was my mother's," she said quietly to Johanna, as she laid it carefully down, "and it may as well have a chance with us." The dogs came up the stairs, looking scared, all but old Leeuw. "He will not leave my husband," Madame Leeftang went on.

"But call him—call your husband!" cried Johanna, in terror. "Listen! Don't you hear?"

And, indeed, by this time a dull roar and sound of advancing water was plainly audible. Madame Leeftang leaned over and called anxiously—

"Pieter! Pieter! It is on us!"

He came up the stairs in answer, Leeuw at his heels—not too soon. As if by magic, in one moment the great flood of sea-water poured through the house. The great gurgle with which this was effected without crash or violent sounds, yet with an absolutely resistless force, the consciousness that all around where land should be was sea, the cries of the poor drowning poultry, the fearful waiting as the lap of the seething water rose higher and higher—made up something so dreadful and so appalling that for a few moments they could only stand immovable as if turned to stone. Then the servant girls broke into loud sobs and cries, Johanna moved away and fell on her knees, and Hilvardine went to

Pieter's side, and looked down the staircase, up which the turbid water was welling. It rose higher and higher. Once he turned round and said to his wife in a hoarse voice—

“Grietje, my woman, get what tables and chairs you can together and put them close by the window.”

Madame Leeftang set herself silently to work. Johanna rose up and helped her as silently. The dogs came over and sniffed about them, whining uneasily. The next instant a thin flood of yellow water ran swiftly over the white floor. Leeftang and Hilvardine retreated, pulling after them the servants, who seemed stupified by fear.

“Up with you!” said Pieter. He lifted the youngest girl, Koosje, as he spoke, and set her on the table,—she was so bewildered as to be almost stupified. A sort of stolid endurance had come back to the others, and they scrambled up, the dogs leaping after them on the chairs. Madame Leeftang gazed calmly out of the window, across which frightened pigeons were flying; but Johanna, after one glance, turned from it, sick at heart. The wind had moderated, but the whole surface of the flood was heaving with angry waves. All the familiar landmarks had disappeared, except where, here or there, a post still stood upright like the mast of some sunken vessel.

“What has become of the mills?” asked Madame Leeftang, in a low voice.

Her husband, who had pulled off his shoes and stockings, splashed through the water, by this time a foot deep, into the girls' room. They heard him open the window.

“They are as we are,” he said, as he came back. “The tops are above the water, and if they were on the look-out they may be safe, so far.”

“Oh, Jan, Jan!” wailed one of the poor girls.

"Surely a boat will come to us," said Hilvardine quietly.

"Yes, a boat will come—if the house stands," added Pieter, under his breath.

For, indeed, the sounds which at first had almost struck them by their absence now seemed to have gathered an appalling significance. There were crashes as if things were being driven against the house; a gurgling swelling and sinking, which at times seemed as if the foundations were being sucked away; the tables and chairs shook under them; the water in the room was still welling up. For one moment Hilvardine lost courage.

"Oh, terrible, terrible!" she cried, burying her face in her hands. Johanna put her arms around her. Madame Leeftang, her motherly eyes full of pity, began quietly to say over a few verses of the Psalms. It quieted them all, even the poor girl who was crying out for her Jan, and little Koosje, whose round apple cheeks were white with terror.

So they waited. It seemed to Johanna that the water had reached its height; she could not be sure. Pieter waded from room to room; but there was no window on that upper story which commanded the part of the land from which help, if help there was, would come, and this impossibility of knowing whether they were thought of as still living added to the desolation a touch of feverish uncertainty. It was possible that from the land it might seem as if the house were submerged beyond hope for its inmates, for the tide was surging close up to the level of the higher windows. Things were carried up to sight—familiar things which now were the prey of the waters, and that seemed to make an almost human appeal for succour to their old owners. So con-

scious was Madame Leeftang of this that she opened the window and drew up a poor battered bucket. Pieter shook his head.

"What's the use?" he asked. "One of the sides is stove in."

His wife made no answer. She could not have explained her little action.

As the time wore on it became evident that the water would not rise higher; on the contrary, it even sank a little. The dark and heavy clouds, moreover, had broken into white masses, with here and there clear sky and intense brilliancy of light from the morning sun. There was no more fear of the sea absolutely swallowing up the house as it stood, but the peril of its sweeping it away not only remained, but was doubtless intensified. Every hour that the waters tossed about it and foamed round its walls, and sucked away its supports, and pounded against it with the posts and rafters they had already torn away, the danger increased. Pieter knew this even better than the women. His stolid resignation was giving way to keen impatience. He went from window to window, hung out handkerchiefs—but to whom could he signal? The only human beings who could by any possibility see him were in as bad, if not worse, plight than themselves.

It seemed to Johanna that a sort of stupor crept over herself and the other women. They did not speak. Every now and then one would break into a quick, shuddering sob; but it did not last long. Numbed with cold and the stiffness of their cramped position, the minutes as they passed dragged like long hours, and more than once a merciful and dreamy unconsciousness so far touched Johanna that she started to find her thoughts far away. Once, indeed, she could have sworn

she heard Neukomm's old psalm-tune dropping down in its sweet hesitating tones from the cathedral tower. With the notes there came other sounds—the sounds of a voice; strong familiar accents. She wondered dully whether she should ever hear them again. Then she looked at Hilvardine's pretty head, and felt an ache in her own heart for the pain that might be in store for his. Such drifting fancies wandered vaguely through her brain—some sad, some sweet, but all tender, and all free from bitterness and the unkindness of envy.

Pieter Leeftang had been away from them longer than usual. When he came back, there was that in his face which made his wife ask quietly, "What is it? You have seen something."

"The west gable has fallen," he said.

There was a pause. Then the young girl whose lover was at the mill broke out once more in heartrending cries for Jan. Madame Leeftang drew her head down on her shoulder.

"God is taking care both of Jan and of us, Rika," she said tenderly.

"But—but——"

"Well?"

"To be drowned!"

"It is an easy death, if it comes to that," Madame Leeftang said simply. "My girl, He'll never put upon us more than we can bear. Look at Koosje, how brave she is!"

She managed to hush the girl's sobs; but they all knew how alarming this news was. If the gable had given way before the buffeting of the waters, what was to prevent the rest of the house from following? Pieter, one foot on a chair, his elbow on his knee, and his chin on his hand, was reflecting gloomily; as if he could read his

mind, old Leeuw raised himself, placed his great dripping forepaws on his master's shoulder, and licked his face. Leeftang patted him, while his countenance fell.

"I understand, old fellow," he said. "You want to tell me you're ready to die with us."

"Or to live," said his wife, in her brave tones.

"Or to live," repeated he. But his voice had little of hope in it. The fall of the gable, and the passive lingering waiting, seemed to have left him nothing but stolid endurance. The cold, too, was beginning to make itself more bitterly felt. Johanna felt Hilvardine shiver, and it had just struck her that she would ask Pieter to get them the *duvets* from the beds, when a sound, unlike the other sounds of which their ears were full, struck upon them all. Was it a cry? With one spring, almost upsetting the others, Pieter was on the table, had burst open the window, and, leaning out, shouted hurriedly with all his might. Leeuw barked so violently in his turn that Madame Leeftang would have hushed him, but that her husband turned angrily upon her. "Let him be, let him be!" he cried. "The more noise the better."

He was like a man possessed, the sudden revulsion from despair to hope being exceedingly strong in its action. He yelled and waved wildy, though there was no one to see, and the women, silenced by his excitement, and breathless, caught hold one of the other, and gazed with staring eyes over his broad shoulders at the great seething mass of waters which stretched far away without a break. Was it for hours that they looked, or minutes? Johanna could not have told, when suddenly another cry sounded, close at hand, and a great round-bowed boat, rowed by four men, came sweeping past the corner of the house, and, catching sight of Leeftang's outstretched figure, set up a shout which rang through the

hearts of the watchers. One or two of the girls began to sob wildly, and to stretch out imploring hands towards the window. A fifth man, who was steering, stood up and flung a rope for Pieter to secure.

"We could see nothing of you, and it looks from the shore as if the house had little but roof and chimneys above water," he called out. "How many are there of you?"

"Eight, and four dogs, mijnheer."

"There's another boat not five minutes behind. We'll take five—and the dogs," he added, with a laugh.

Madame Leeftang would have had Johanna go first, but she shook her head.

"Take the younger ones, Grietje;" and, indeed, three of the girls were pressing, crying, praying. They passed them out into the boat; and after them Hilvardine, who would have resisted, but that Johanna's intense determination was not to be gainsaid. The steersman she had immediately recognized as the engineer officer at Alkmaar, Mathius' brother, and she was resolved that Hilvardine should go in his boat. The girl said proudly, with a reproachful look—

"I am not afraid, but I will go, for it is harder to go than to stay."

Then there was a discussion between Pieter and his wife, peremptorily cut short by the young engineer, who said they wanted another man for other rescues, and that the farmer should come. Rika, the young girl whose Jan was in peril, and who was in a state of extreme depression, was the third to remain. She sat crouched up and shivering on the table, resting her chin on her hands and staring out at the waters. Madame Leeftang touched her, and said softly—

"They'll come for us in a few minutes. You'll soon be safe, Rika."

"Not Jan—Jan's drowned, mevrouw."

"Drowned? Nonsense! Why should he not be safe as well as we? The master will get a boat to the mills at once."

But she shook her head.

"He's drowned, drowned!"

• That was all she would say.

The perils of their situation were the same, but with the promise of deliverance they seemed to have lost fear. Yet the minutes passed and no deliverance came, and a certain awful solitude hung over that great expanse of water which wrapped them round, and looked as if the house itself were the plaything of an hour, to be crushed at any moment by its might. Madame Leeftang stirred uneasily; then pulled off her stockings and waded into Johanna's room, tying up in a bundle things of hers and Hilvardine's which were portable, but of which they had not thought before.

"There," she said, coming back, "now I shall make up the china. But they are a long while coming."

Johanna was sitting, looking out of the open window, and watching the increasing glory of the sun. For now, instead of grey and sullen masses of cloud, fiercely hurled forward by the wind, the heavens were full of white light, vaporous and lovely; the waters, gradually quieting, caught its brilliancy upon the highest points of their waves; everywhere light was flashing, spreading, shining—it was difficult to believe that it meant ruin and desolation for so many. And Hilvardine was out there on the shining waters with the other Mathius. And she——?

Suddenly Grietje grasped her arm.

"Mejufvrouw, I hear them!"

Her strained ears had indeed caught the sound of oars, and the next moment a small boat swept into sight. Two men were rowing; in the stern, pale as death, his eager eyes fixed upon the house, sat Mathius himself. When Johanna saw him, her eyes too fastened themselves upon him. For the moment everything else was forgotten—danger, preservation, the great flood; she could think of nothing, realize nothing, but the fact that he was there, and that he was seeking her.

Mathius stood up, stretched out his arms, and called her name.

“Johanna!”

CHAPTER XXVI.

“But because the human love though true and sweet—
Yours and mine—
Has been sent by love more tender, more complete,
More divine;
That it leads our hearts to rest at last in heaven
Far above you;
Do I take you as a gift that God has given—
And I love you!”

WHEN Johanna was seated in the boat, she was next Mathius, his looks devoured her. Then he stared back at the poor farm, left deserted in the midst of the waters, with a shudder.

“That you should have been there!”

“Did you know it?” she asked timidly.

“When we met the other boat and I saw Hilvardine. Not till then. I had no idea where you had hidden yourselves. Good heavens! how could I have passed the night if I had dreamt that you were on the very *polder* my brother was talking anxiously about?”

“He was anxious?”

“Yes, when he heard that the farmer had been over to Alkmaar after him, because he has no great opinion of the *dijkgraaf*.”

Madame Leeftang interrupted him, pointing to Rika's fair head buried in her lap.

“Would it be possible to row to the mills, mijnheer? The girl has friends there, and is in sore trouble.”

“A boat has gone,” said the professor. “It was got off before the first which came to you, from a nearer point. By this time——”

He hesitated. Safety that night depended on the watch which had been kept. That they knew, and Rika buried her head deeper. Johanna looked pitifully at her; but when she turned her eyes to Mathius, the hot happy colour rushed into her pale face, every other thought vanishing in a wondering tide of joy. What did it all mean? She felt as if she could not yet ask herself this question. She was weakened by what she had gone through; if it were necessary to resist this strange new sensation, she had no power to apply the necessary severity—the doors of her heart opened instinctively. Yet what did it mean? One struggle she made, one effort to recall her old fancies, she said quickly—

“Hilvardine was in the boat—you saw her, of course?”

“Did I?” he asked. “Upon my soul, I hardly know! Yes, I saw her, certainly, and that showed me where you were, but how could I think any more of her when I knew of your danger?”

There was that in his tones, in his look, which pointed his words with a tenderness which was unmistakable, with a kind of ownership as sweet as it was strange. Overhead the white luminous clouds were driving gaily, the waters flashed, the keen cool wind of the morning helped the boat towards land. What had become of the dangers, the darkness of the night?—Where were Johanna’s thoughts for the pretty homestead, left a dismal wreck in the flood? Madame Leeftang’s eyes were fixed sadly upon it; poor little Rika, thinking of her Jan, sobbed and trembled. Johanna tried in vain to drag up the sorrow which is not often so reluctant a visitor; in vain she called herself cold and heartless: joy, bliss, love, danced in her heart, and kept other comers out. How it could be she did not know, but suddenly, unreservedly, she knew that Mathius loved her; and at that moment

when they were close together, no disguise of her own feelings could be conjured up—she knew also that with her whole heart she loved him.

The boat was making for a dyke which apparently had checked the further spread of the waters. A road ran along the top, and a few green and brown-fronted houses were also ranged at the top. It was from this spot that the rescue had been organized, though a want of boats had caused delay; it was here that a crowd of figures were collected, waving, running, shouting, ready to vociferously welcome these neighbours snatched from a terrible death. Madame Leeftang smoothed Rika's fair hair.

"Now we shall hear," she whispered. But the girl shook her head. She sat up, however, and gazed at the figures which, clustering together, gradually resolved themselves into well-known forms. "There is Dirk, his wife, and Maurits—look, Rika, look!" cried Madame Leeftang eagerly; "and little Dientje, and"—her voice grew slower—"and Hendrik, and——"

"There is no Jan!" replied the girl, in a hard strained voice. She was the first to spring on shore; she looked round upon them with a glance which they all understood, for they all knew her. "Where is Jan Kerk?" she demanded.

They looked at one another without answering, till Dirk's wife stepped forth and began to sob.

"It came upon us unawares," she said. "My husband dragged me up the stairs, and Jan, he tried to get out his brother. It was that which kept him too late; but you mustn't take on so, Rika, for he was a good lad."

With one bitter cry which they never forgot, the girl turned round and flung herself on Madame Leeftang's neck. She, tenderly soothing her, led her away to one

of the small houses with green boarded fronts. Dirk came up and spoke to Mathius, and the men in the boat, rapidly securing her, started off along the dyke, while Mathius turned to Johanna.

"My brother has left word that every available man should go down to the broken dykes," he said, "and I must be off at once. All the country round is raised. You understand why I leave you?"

Understand? She gave him a proud and glad look. It was not she who would keep him back from his duty.

"And you will find Hilvardine, and get some dry clothes? She is in one of these houses."

He had her hand in his as he spoke. Suddenly, and without another word, before them all, he stooped down, kissed her straight on the lips, and walked rapidly away.

Leeflang had sent Hilvardine and the three girls into one of the houses, to which Dirk's wife directed Johanna. She stood for some time watching the tall figure of Mathius striding along the dyke; when it was lost in the other figures which were quickly collecting, she turned and walked slowly towards the house, the proud and happy look still in her eyes. Hilvardine was in a little room upstairs, standing at the window. A sudden rush of colour leapt into Johanna's cheeks as she saw that this window commanded the spot where Mathius had taken his farewell. She had forgotten Hilvardine. The girl did not wait for her to speak, though she did not turn round.

"That was the professor," she said.

"Yes. Were you not surprised?" said Johanna, a little brokenly.

"Why should one be? It is natural enough that he should be staying with his brother at Alkmaar. I can

tell you that his brother is in a state of fury. I should not like to be the *dijkgraaf* this morning; he is likely to hear some pretty strong expressions." She paused. Then she added abruptly, "You might, however, I think, have told me that the professor was so near us."

"Do you suppose I knew it?" cried Johanna. She went over to the window, and put her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Hilvardine, believe me, I knew nothing, nothing"—she repeated the words with emphasis—"until now."

"Well, now you know enough," said the young girl, after a momentary hesitation. She glanced quickly at Johanna. Johanna was smiling; by the look in her eyes she had wandered into some happy dreamland. "Do you hear?" cried Hilvardine, impatiently; "you know enough now."

"Yes," said the other, simply. "But I thought——"
"What?"

"Something quite different. That it was you."

"I?" Hilvardine laughed gaily. "I? You must have been dreaming. Don't you remember what I said to you at Alkmaar? And, pray, when is this other wedding to come off?"

"Hilvardine!"

"Well, it looked like it just now."

Her tone was mocking, and Johanna blushed still more deeply.

"If you saw that, you saw all that I know myself. Was that a time to talk of weddings? Oh, Hilvardine, poor Rika's Jan is drowned, as she supposed."

"They say several are drowned, but fortunately it was not such a very large *polder*, or things would have been a great deal worse. Is the professor gone to help to mend the dyke? On his hands and knees?"

Johanna did not answer; the girl's levity of manner pained her, and yet she was struck by the deadly whiteness of her face. Presently Madame Leeftang appeared; she had got Rika to lie down and had given her some tea, now she had prepared breakfast for all, unless the young ladies would allow her to bring theirs to them upstairs. This Johanna would not hear of. She looked with amazement at Grietje—house, crops, property ruined, and yet she was quite calm and self-possessed, and showed no excitement. When she got an opportunity, she said this to her.

“Mejufvrouw,” said Madame Leeftang, with a sad little smile, “house and crops are good, and my heart is very sore for Pieter, who sees the labours of years swept away; but life and health are better, and if God leaves us these, what can we do but thank Him, and take courage? There is poor Jan's mother, with two good sons called away—that is a trouble!”

“Grietje, I have not been thinking enough about you or any one!”

“See there, then, mejufvrouw! It needs no conjuring to tell that what has brought sorrow to some has brought joy to you. And the Lord sends all.”

The food refreshed them, and sent a little colour into Hilvardine's pale cheeks. When it was finished, Johanna made her lie down, she herself was leaving the room when Hilvardine called to her—

“Where are you going?”

“So many people hurry by, I must go down and hear from some of them what is doing at the dyke.”

“Ah, now I know why I am put here,” said the girl, in a bantering tone.

“Do you? Why?”

“That I should not look out of window again.”

“Imagine your finding that out!” said Johanna gaily, as she closed the door behind her. When her steps had quite died away, Hilvardine sprang up and ran to the window. It was true, as Johanna had said, that people were passing and repassing. The *waterstaat* was busily at work, men and women, requisitioned from surrounding villages, were pouring down, spades and tools in hand, to the scene of disaster; carts rumbled by, laden with bundles and bushes stoutly tied together so that they might form a sort of *fascine*; in some cases where carts were wanting, great quantities of them had been roped round and harnessed lightly to a horse, ridden by a man and urged to his utmost speed. As these dashed by there was a frightened scattering of women and children. Owing to the flatness of the land, it was possible to follow the hurrying crowd all along the line of the dykes, until it concentrated itself on a spot where it resembled a black cluster of bees, and where boats had also gathered. It was evident that the workers were labouring with might and main, and that not a man would be spared for hours; Hilvardine turned away from the window, flung herself upon the bed, and gave way to a noiseless tearless paroxysm of sobs. All the time she despised herself for her distress, and the shame she felt added tenfold to her trouble. Though nobody else knew her secret, it was dreadful to be aware of it herself. She was sure that she loved Mathius, and she had sometimes fancied that he loved her. All such fancies were now rudely dispelled, and in poor Hilvardine’s eyes life had suddenly assumed a pallid and weariful aspect. She was not exactly vain of her beauty, but she had never been without a radiant consciousness that it was attractive, and it seemed hard that at the moment when she felt it might have served her, it should prove absolutely of no

avail. Van Regensdorf had never touched her heart. Matthius had touched something; she felt it was her heart, but it is more probable that it was her conscience. She felt for him a young girl's eager veneration, hero-worship, and was certain that under his guidance she could mount to unattained heights. Only in the last year had those heights seemed desirable in her eyes, but the shock of Willem's death, and the long illness which succeeded it, had given depth to feelings already stirring in her heart. She was almost ready to believe that they all belonged to and hung upon Mathius. If he had taken her to him, ah, how easy it would be to be good! And now it looked dreadfully dull again, and she was ready to believe that, from one cause and another, all hope and brightness were gone out of her life. Yet she was not without her heroic efforts. Johanna might have been unselfish, but it needed a struggle for the girl to acknowledge it frankly. In spite of her mocking words she did acknowledge it. She tried with all her might to be just. Moreover, the heights looked dull and cold now, but she did not turn her back upon them, for all the chill in the air, and the dreary solitary feeling which crept over her. One thought was her sharpest scourge. If she had not helped to separate Johanna from Captain Wrangel, this trial might never have come. This surged backwards and forwards in her mind with a strength which exhausted her, until at last, worn out by all she had gone through, she dropped asleep.

She slept through a good deal. Carts and horses rattled backwards and forwards in search of the necessary material; and, what between workers and idlers, there was generally some one to report progress. The news was contradictory enough, sometimes alarming, sometimes reassuring. One or two mentioned that the

young Heer Mathius seemed to be everywhere at once. There was a great deal of guttural shouting; also cries of joy from the children, who were delighted at this arrival of the sea at their doors. Madame Leeftang came out of the house, and, standing by Johanna, looked across the dancing waters, at the chimneys and red roof of her home. Rika, she said, was sleeping. Little Koosje had been hard at work helping her and some other women to tie up faggots. It was the inner dyke which they were repairing. If the wind blew again it was probable that they would not succeed; but the men thought it would be calm, and in that case to-morrow they would attack the outer line of defence. A burgomaster or two had already arrived on the scene, and by the afternoon it was certain that people would come from Amsterdam and other parts; it was by no means impossible that the King, who had already telegraphed, might himself appear to inspect the mischief. Such an accident in the Netherlands is a national matter. The sea is an enemy always trying to effect an entrance. If he succeeds there is a general rally for a rescue, and no rest until he is beaten back.

"If the pumping-mill could but act!" sighed Madame Leeftang.

"But even then, would your house be habitable?"

"It would have to be rebuilt."

"In the same place? After all this you would not be afraid? Oh, Grietje!"

"No, mejufvrouw, I am not afraid. After this I dare say our dyke will be the strongest along the coast, for such things do not happen twice in the same place. And what will you? We are all exposed to the same dangers; they are round us from the moment we are born, and we grow up always knowing what may come. The brother

of the woman whose house we are in was drowned on the Borselen *polder*. Oh, as Pieter says, there's no use in running away. When we have got a grip on the land we must hold fast, and fight the sea together. I expect, though, we shall get another *dijkgraaf*."

"Has Heer Mathius been long in Alkmaar?" Johanna asked, in as unconcerned a tone as she could advance.

"Oh yes. He lived with his mother till she died, but it is only lately he has been given his present post. This is Heer Hector, the youngest of the brothers. They are a good family. Would you like to walk down, me-jufvrouw, and see what they are doing at the dyke?" added Grietje, seeing Johanna's wistful glances in that direction.

The girl hesitated. Then she said quickly, "No, no, Grietje; you told me yourself that women were only in the way, unless they helped; and though I dare say I could bind faggots as well as some of the others, nobody knows that fact. How long do you suppose they will work? All day?"

"All day, so long as the tide will let them; and all night too, for the matter of that. If you do not care to go, me-jufvrouw, I think I will walk over to my sister. I would wager that, since she has heard of our misfortune, none of them have had any peace with her. She will be declaring their *polder* is unsafe, and fussing her life out. But I can get some clothes there for Pieter and myself. And before I go I must send Koosje and one of the others down to the dyke with food. Maria Klang is there herself."

Johanna helped her to pack up the provisions—cheese and cold meat and bread. When Grietje had started, she carried some up to Hilvardine; but, finding, her still asleep, put it down by the side of the bed, and

stole away. She went softly about the house, setting things to rights; for though everything was, as usual, of spotless cleanliness, the absence of the owner, and the extraordinary accident of the morning, had caused some confusion. Madame Leeftang had contrived to send a girl with a telegram, asking for clothes for Johanna and Hilvardine. Johanna was sure that if Frans were in or near home it would bring him—perhaps his wife too. It was astonishing with what different colouring she thought of Madame Marken since the morning. Perhaps it was not only her new happiness which wrought the change. She had been face to face with death; its cold waters had all but touched her. The great realities, when they come upon us, leave little space for the petty frets and jars of our life. She thought tenderly of Frans, and far more kindly of his wife.

Presently she heard a child cry, and, reflecting that the little cluster of houses was emptied of able-bodied people, set off in pursuit of the cry, finding a deserted baby in an empty house. Probably it had been left in charge of some of the other children, who were launching toy rafts on the water in high glee. Johanna took it up, warmed some food which was near at hand, and at last succeeded in overcoming its decided objection to a stranger. It did the best it could for itself by quickly going to sleep again when she laid it in its wooden cradle, and she slipped out of the house, determining to keep within hearing of its cries. There were sadder sounds of weeping in the next house. A woman stood in the doorway, with her apron flung over her face. Johanna guessed it to be the poor mother who had lost her two sons. A feeble old man's voice was heard from within. Johanna could not pass by the house, though she felt for some time that silence was the best form of

sympathy. Gradually, however, it seemed to comfort the mother to talk of her lads and her sorrows. She came back to the stove, and poured out a history of them from the time they were born, the old grandfather chiming in, but disposed to branch off to other remembrances of floods. Johanna felt that they liked having her there, were it only to listen. She lingered a long while, touched to the heart by the woman's grief; by the contrast between the saddened, dimly lit room with its homely furniture, its presence of age and death, and the bustle and brightness of the scene outside, where all was eager resistance and the strong energy of work. The mother felt it, too, when at length Johanna left them, and she stood again at the door and looked out.

"They would have been working there the best of all," she said, nodding her head towards the dyke. "Eh, but it is strange to think of them, so young, and all over!"

Strange—yes. If that were so, then the strangest problem in the universe!

When Johanna got out it was late afternoon; some of the women had returned. Maria Klang told her that the tide was getting so high that a good many of the men would have to knock off work, and leave what could be done to the boats. It was calm, and they were very hopeful about the dyke, though the men were wet and weary. Fresh gangs were coming to take their places. Finally—

"If I had not nearly forgot that I have a note for you, *mejufvrouw*, from the brother of Heer Mathius!"

It was only a line, hastily pencilled, and telling her that he should remain on the spot all night; but at break of day, if all went well, would get an hour or two's sleep and change of clothes. Would she meet him outside their house in the early morning, and walk a little way

along the dyke with him when he went back? No words of endearment; yet Johanna, as she read it, felt as if it contained a thousand. There was a quiet strong assurance about it which was at this moment inexpressibly soothing. The two words with which it ended, "Your Arnold," required nothing to be added. She smiled happily, and held it close to her heart, and walked away from the houses to a quiet spot where she might sit down and think of the great joy which had come to her. No hurrying crowd now passed along the dyke; the setting sun, flinging royal tints across the sky, shone gaily on the little homely painted houses, and lit the windows like flame; the waters lay quietly stretched out, looking as peaceful as if death and they had nothing to do with each other. If it had not been for the tops of the poor houses and mills sticking up, and for strange suggestive things which floated on the surface of the sea, it would have been almost impossible to recall the past night. As it was, it seemed to Johanna that days had passed since those terrible hours—days of happiness. An extraordinary sense of freedom swept over her. Only now did she begin to realize how resolutely she had kept down fancies which were pushing vigorously upwards. The change in Arent had given her a feeling of insecurity; she had no longer dared to trust her own imagination; she dreaded another deception. Had it not been for this, little signs that Mathius loved her had not been wanting of late. And now the feelings she had restrained leapt up in triumphant liberty. She let herself indulge the joy of dwelling on every crushed remembrance. She reflected how good he was, how steadfast, how strong! All the professors spoke of him as an honour to the university; all his friends—better still—trusted him. Tears were in her eyes as she sat and looked over the

glory of the shining waters, but they were tears of proud joy; for a day ago she had been loverless, homeless, and now it seemed to her that her lot was blessed as no woman's had ever been blessed before. Through the past year it appeared, as she looked back, that she had felt his kindness surrounding her, always effective, and always ready; but she had schooled herself to suppose that she came in for it as others did, and for no dearer and closer reason. The revelation was all the sweeter; it was like the story of the past night—storm and suffering and loss, but God's love in all, and now His sun shining in its fairness. When Johanna went into the house, Grietje gazed at her almost with reverence; there was a look on her face as if the glory of the sunset lingered there.

It was a strange, broken night. Many times Johanna stole to the window and looked at the twinkling lights clustered together like golden points in the darkness, and sent out her heart to Mathius. People were astir late and early. When the first grey lights crept over the dark waters, she got up silently and dressed herself; but she would not go out, lest if he saw her figure at the door from far off, and guessed who it was, he might give up some of the rest he would need so sorely and come to her. She only sat in the window, and, among the distant specks moving along the dyke, tried to assure herself that this or that was he. Then the long shadows of the houses begun to shorten on the road, and the fresh lights to brighten, and the glad stir of day to move from point to point. And so, watching, Johanna at last saw Mathius' tall figure coming along towards the little hamlet, and in a moment was out of the house and going to meet her lover.

CHAPTER XXVII.

“Gone was every trace of sorrow,
As the fog from off the water,
As the mist from off the meadow.”

THEY had a great deal to say to each other; everything, in fact, that needed to be put into definite shape, considering that yesterday's proceedings, however satisfactory to themselves, might have been criticized by others as a little vague in outline. Mathius, for instance, as Johanna reminded him, had never proposed to her; he had taken everything for granted without giving her the chance of saying no.

“When ought I to have asked you? Before you got out of your window? I'll answer for one thing, that you would have been too frightened to refuse.”

“Ask Grietje which of us looked the most terrified,” retorted Johanna.

“Oh, I give in at once. And I can't jest about it yet. When I think of you, my darling, out in those waters, watching them rise higher and higher, obliged to stay there and wait for whatever might come——! Did you think of me? Tell me, did you think of me?”

“Yes, I thought of you,” she said gently. “I did not see any shame in thinking of you then.”

“Shame! What shame could there be in thinking of me at any time?”

“But I did not know you—cared,” she said in a low voice.

“It is very extraordinary, then,” remarked Mathius. “It seems to me it was evident enough for any one to see. You take a great deal of plain speaking, Johanna.”

"You cannot say you have favoured me with much," she replied, with a gay laugh. "You have left me very much in the dark."

"Oh," he said, "you were clever enough to know by intuition."

"Intuition is the most unsatisfactory thing in the world in some matters."

He looked at her for an instant. "But other people could find out."

"What other people?"

"Well, for one, Madame Marken."

Johanna was fairly amazed. "She of all people! I shall begin to admire her discretion presently. I could not have believed she could have resisted saying something."

"Perhaps you behaved to her as you did to me—you would not take a hint."

"I don't know," she said; "hints always seemed to me to tend in another direction. And do you know, I have a very big question to ask?"

"So have I. How far are you going to walk with me?"

"Must you really go back to that horrid work?"

"Yes, I must," said Mathius gravely; "and you, my dear one, would be the last to ask me to leave it."

"Then, I will go as far as—— Oh, never mind! Until you send me back. Have you breakfasted well?"

"Is that your question?"

"No; mine is much more serious. Why did you leave our town without a word of farewell to us, and that just at the time when I felt so particularly friendless?"

Mathius turned, took her hands in his strong clasp, and looked into her eyes.

"Johanna," he said earnestly, "you are sure you love me?"

She met his look with another of great pride and happiness.

"I love you with all my heart," she said slowly and distinctly.

"And you have no lingering regrets for—another?"

She coloured now, but did not remove her eyes, or falter in her words.

"None; I did once love Arent Wrangel. When I found that he changed, I suffered a great deal, but my love died. Do you blame me for that?"

"God forbid!" he said very earnestly. "You have taken the last load off my heart."

"Oh, you did not need it!" cried Johanna, in distress.

"No, I hardly needed it. And yet, my dear one, when you put that question I felt that it was the time to set it at rest for ever."

They were walking on again by this time, and Mathius was silent for a few moments. Then he said, "Do not think I am asking this except as a necessary answer to yourself, but had you not an interview with Captain Wrangel before you left your brother's house?"

"Yes," Johanna answered firmly. "Not one of my seeking, however. He asked my brother, and Frans arranged it without referring to me."

"It was the town councillor who told me," continued the professor. "He was naturally very full indeed of his own newly settled affairs, and of Madame Marken's high qualities. I ventured to make some inquiries about you, being very sure the news would be a shock. Your brother told me that he should have hesitated to secure Madame Marken's consent, had he believed that it would cost you a home. He was certain, on the contrary, that it would release you to a happier. 'She is the most unselfish girl in the world,' he went on, 'and she would not leave us

while my children needed a mother's care. Perhaps I ought not to have accepted the sacrifice, but I did accept it, and I suspect Wrangel was a little annoyed. I am afraid Johanna suffered a good deal. However, I met him in the town to-day, and directly he heard of our changed circumstances, he begged to be allowed to call. I could see that he had not really given her up in the least, and I foresee the happiest results from to-morrow's interview.' There, Johanna! had I not some reason?"

She shook her head. "You might have waited to know."

"So I might. But I had nothing to feed upon in the way of hope."

"More than I had."

"Johanna!" he exclaimed reproachfully. "You might have seen how I was always seeking you, while it seemed to me you did your best to avoid me."

"Were you always seeking me? I thought——"

"What did you think?"

But she only answered him by a smile. In truth, even to him she could never touch upon what she had thought. Presently she put another question, in the form of a demure remark.

"If you were so very hopeless, it seems to me hope grew miraculously. You took things very much for granted yesterday morning."

"Ah, I don't know how it was," he said, in the same tone. "Somehow or other, the instant I saw you I forgot all about my forebodings."

"Then, I am to thank the flood for opening your eyes. Pray, what should you have done if you had not had this opportunity?"

"Waited for the next. I should soon have known whether you were going to marry Captain Wrangel. I

was going back to-morrow. Now, tell me what will you do next?"

"I am sure to hear from Frans to-day, even if he does not come. Constans sent our things last night, and said she had forwarded the telegram to her father. When he comes I shall see what Hilvardine wishes."

"You must come back and be married from your brother's house," said the professor, with decision; "and that right soon."

Johanna was silent. He was peremptory, but it was a peremptoriness which pleased her, and this silence as they walked on was as sweet as the sweetest words could be. As she looked round upon the grass-lands on one side, and the invading waters on the other, it seemed to her that she had never before known what beauty meant. The freshness of the morning, the eagerness of spring, the very homeliness of everything about her, black and white cows grazing, distant red roofs, windmills, sent glad throbs into her heart. Suddenly she stopped and laid her hands on his arm.

"Oh, Arnold, I am so happy!" she said, in a broken voice. "How can I ever thank God enough?"

He held her close to him and kissed her passionately.

As she walked back, with tingling cheeks, and some fear that in the distant group every one might not be as he assured her they were—looking at the dyke, she really cared little enough for what might have been seen or said. Her heart beat high with pride and joy. The path which lay before her had that golden light shining along it which we see but once in a lifetime. She had never known it before: she asked herself whether it could indeed be she to whom it was given, for where it was but a short time before all had looked grey and sunless. Then some other reflections came into her mind. Though

to stay where she was was very sweet, she could not remain longer, if only for Hilvardine's sake. They must leave that day, and, if no sign came from Frans, she would telegraph to Cootje, and go to the Hague. When she got back to the house, Hilvardine was hard at work helping Madame Leeftang, and apparently herself again. There were dark patches under her eyes as if she had not slept well, but she was in good spirits, and made no allusion to Johanna's early walk. Leeftang had been back for an hour or two. They were making excellent progress with the dyke, and directly it was repaired, would begin the work of pumping out the water. He was full of the praises of the young engineer, Mathius' brother, who appeared to be indefatigable in resource.

By-and-by Johanna called Hilvardine out of the house, to consult her about their movements, and ask her whether she were inclined for the Hague.

"With your dear Madame van Weede, of course," said the girl grimacing. "Well, if you like."

"What would *you* like?"

"All that I can't get," said Hilvardine cheerfully. "My dear Aunt Johanna, it is so dull to be content with anything else."

"What can we do for you, then?" said Johanna, looking at her wistfully.

"What you do for the child who cries for the moon. Do you think our little golden-haired Maria will ever cry for the moon? But no—she is too sensible."

"Dear little Maria!"

"Can't we have her at the Hague? Ah, I see in your face that is one of my impossibilities. You don't know how nice they all are!"

"Still, I do wish something short of them would content you."

"Oh, so do I," said Hilvardine, leaning against a post and looking across the land. "The train must be in, and, as you see, heaps and heaps of people are coming from Alkmaar. Shall I hope that my father and Madame —Steen are not amongst them?"

"Then, you expect them?"

"Yes, I expect them. If you ask me, I should say they were in the fourth carriage. It goes so slowly that the horse must be very old, and Madame Steen would have got him at a cheaper rate than the others."

"I should not be surprised if Madame van Weede came too."

"In that case she is in the first carriage, which is far ahead. You will know in a minute."

Hilvardine was right. When the carriage drove up, Cootje sprang out, radiant, and pointed to her husband.

"Make him own that I chose well. I was determined to leave all those people behind, and to have the first of you, and I had my way."

"Oh, as usual!" said Bernhard, laughing and shaking himself.

"Luckily for you, mijnheer! But, my dearest Johanna, tell me, is it really true that you were on the very *polder* which was inundated? Good Heavens do you mean there!"

For, indeed, the poor water-logged farm, a large part of which had now fallen in, presented a most dreary and ruined appearance, and it is scarcely surprising that the idea of any one she loved being exposed to such a terrible fate should have touched the warm-hearted Cootje to tears. She gazed at it mutely for a minute, and then covered her face with her hands. Bernhard put his hand on her shoulder, and talked to Hilvardine till she had recovered herself.

"Yes," Johanna heard him saying, "I saw your father on the platform, and Madame Steen——"

"In a violet bonnet, which makes her look absolutely saffron-colour," put in Cootje, removing her hands. "Quick! let us talk before they come; for Bernhard never allows me to get in a word. Johanna and Hilvardine, you will both go back with me to the Hague to-day. Why did you not come yesterday? Johanna, I always thought you had almost too much sense; what could possess you to stay a night in this hateful place?"

Johanna was crimson. She felt herself the most deceitful of women. Cootje, too, attracted by this sudden rush of colour, was looking at her with amazement.

"We had talked of going to the Hague to-day," said Johanna unsteadily.

"Oh! Well, do you mind waiting for an hour? for Bernhard has set his heart upon going to the dyke, and he is insufferable if he is thwarted."

"In an hour? That is so soon!" cried Johanna.

"My dear, do you mean to say you are not pining to be off? This dismal desolate place!"

Johanna, who had begun to recover herself, laid her hand on Cootje's green velvet pelisse, with its trimmings of sable, and laughed.

"You Hague people are too grand for us poor northerners," she said.

"Ah, but I believe there is something else," said Madame van Weede, under her breath; "never mind, I shall find out."

She nodded gaily. Other carriages began to rattle by; evidently there would be a crowd at the dyke to-day. Hilvardine, who was watching the arrivals, became very pale. A carriage was driving by, when the lady inside uttered an exclamation, called to the coachman

to stop, and out got the town councillor and his wife. Frans was confused and agitated; if Hilvardine was white, he was red, and he stammered, while he embraced his daughter and sister affectionately. The presence of Monsieur and Madame van Weede, however, was an immense assistance; in a minute or two it was possible to be talking connectedly, and to be giving and receiving an account of the all-absorbing accident. Frans was quite sure that some one was very much to blame; he had always maintained that another system of supervision might be introduced. It would not surprise him if what had happened here were to happen all round the coast.

"Mathius has got a brother engaged in the *waterstaat* at Alkmaar," he said. "Those young fellows are always as conceited as peacocks, or one might get at him through the professor; though no one knows what has become of the professor, do they, Anna Mie?"

"Professor Mathius is here," said Johanna in a low voice.

"Here! What an extraordinary coincidence! It is so unlike him to get leave, and we heard he had gone to England to attend a scientific meeting. Here! You don't say so! Shall we find him at the dyke, or where? Where did you discover him?"

"It was he who discovered us—he and his brother," explained Johanna, not venturing to look up again after she had caught Cootje's eyes fixed upon her with an expression of whimsical astonishment. She felt as if she were proclaiming her story to the wide world, and yet she was only relating a simple fact. "They came in the boats which took us away," she went on desperately.

"Well, that is the most strange thing!" exclaimed her brother.

"Not at all!" said Madame Steen briskly. "What is

more natural than that he should be with his relations? Directly we got the telegram, I hoped that you might have had him to look after you. You know that we were at Arnheim?"

No; Johanna did not know, but she was grateful for the interruption, and used it promptly. Was it cold at Arnheim? or hot? Had Madame van Alphen returned? And what messages had been sent to her? Madame Steen kept up the ball of conversation, and quenched an attempt of her husband's to break in again with questions as to the professor. Madame van Weede strolled on a little way with Hilvardine; the two gentlemen began to make arrangements for walking down to the dyke, which Bernhard was impatient to inspect. Then there were the general exclamations at sight of the remains of the poor farm. Monsieur van Weede came back to ask what had become of the animals. Johanna told him the cows were turned out in safe pastures, and Pieter Leeftang's fears had led him to place the horses in the hamlet where they now were. Pigs and poultry had all been drowned, and the carts and ricks of course destroyed, and spoilt hay had been floating about ever since. A few more questions, and the two started off.

"I shall bring Mathius back," Frans called over his shoulder. Johanna found Madame Steen's shrewd eyes fixed on her.

"So the professor is here," she remarked. "Well, Johanna, and what are you going to do?"

The question was put significantly, and Johanna rapidly reflected that Mathius would certainly inform her brother on their way back. "I am going to marry him," she said quietly.

"And you are quite right. He will make an excellent husband for any one who does not mind marrying her

master. I am very glad, Johanna, for I have a real regard for you, though you do not like me quite so well. If you were wise, however, let me tell you, you would feel grateful to me; for if I had not taken Frans and the children off your hands, where would you be now? When you have lived longer in the world, you will learn that it is not always the pleasantest things which bring happiness to our doors. You are very happy now, and to what do you owe it? To the flood, and to Madame Marken." She laughed, and walked away a few steps without waiting for an answer; then came back and said, "You and Hilvardine will come back with us to-day, will you not?"

"We had thought of Madame van Weede's."

Madame Steen considered for a moment. "Let Hilvardine go with her, and do you come with us. You will see then for yourself that I shall neither beat nor starve the children, and that, without any profession of romance, your brother is very well contented."

"I wonder at you more than at him," said Johanna naively.

"Well, it was dull living alone, especially in summer when every one was out of the town. Besides, it adds to your dulness to be very poor, and to have to spend all the ingenuity of your life in making both ends meet. Do not look so shocked, my dear. I told you you would find no romance, and Frans is thoroughly acquainted with my motives. So am I with his, for the matter of that. But I think, for the present, Hilvardine, if she likes it, had better stay away—until she gets tired. She is thoroughly tired of this."

"How can you tell?"

"I see it in her eyes. Did you really suppose Hilvardine was the girl to be content with cows and windmills and *polders*? No, Johanna; I understand her better

than you do. I believe we shall get on very well together if we are left alone. She will marry in a year or two, and, you will see, when that happens we shall be the best of friends."

"It is true that I have never understood her," said Johanna mournfully.

"How should you? You are too simple, too single-minded. But you have done her good. All this year, there is no doubt of it, you have done her good."

"By the process which you describe as the flood and Madame Marken?" answered Johanna, with a smile. "Well, let me take what comfort I can."

"Oh, a little will go a long way just now," said the other.

She stood looking at her. Johanna's eyes were on the distant dyke; it was probable that she hardly heard these last words. The next moment Madame van Weede and Hilvardine strolled back. Grietje had put some chairs outside in the sun. They all sat down; poor sad little Rika, her eyes red with crying, came and peeped at them from Kerk's doorway. Hilvardine looked pale and proud. Cootje leant forward and said sweetly—

"Madame Steen, has Johanna told you of my designs upon her and Hilvardine? I want to carry them back to the Hague."

"Hilvardine will like that, I dare say," said Madame Steen. "Johanna thinks of returning with us."

She carefully kept her eyes fixed on the ground. Hilvardine darted a reproachful look at Johanna. Cootje's face changed to blank dismay, her theories being not at all in favour of Hilvardine getting what she liked, particularly when she considered that she was to be the medium. Besides, she was accustomed to have her own way.

"Ah," she said at last, shaking her head, "you have stolen a march upon me. It isn't fair. I should not give in so easily if I did not know that Johanna would be altogether on your side. No old friendships will have any chance with her. It isn't fair."

A horribly blank feeling swept over Hilvardine; she felt as if no one wanted her. She would have liked to refuse going to the Hague, but that no other place seemed open. If Madame Steen had objected, there would have been some pleasure in resisting; on the contrary, she had given cheerful assent. She jumped up and went into the house.

"She is disappointed," said Madame Steen, looking after her.

"So am I," said Cootje, a little petulantly.

"What am I to do?" asked Johanna, distressed.

"What you like, for once," said Madame Steen, smiling; and Madame van Weede, recovering herself, began to laugh.

"Madame Steen is right," she said. "It is you we ought all to be thinking about. But it's your fault. You don't accustom us to it."

Johanna, however, was not at her ease. She reflected for a moment; then she got up and followed Hilvardine, finding her crying her eyes out on the bed.

"My dear!" she exclaimed, hastening to her; "what is it?"

"You had better go away."

"Not till I know more."

"Well, do you suppose it is agreeable to see that woman?" Hilvardine sat up and pushed back her hair.

"Not in that position," said Johanna softly. "But I do not think you will dislike her."

"Yes, I shall, and I am glad to have a good reason for it."

Johanna was silent. "Then, you will be glad to be at the Hague," she said presently.

"Madame van Weede does not want me. Nobody wants me."

"Oh, but I want you," said Johanna smiling. To her amazement, Hilvardine sprang up and flung her arms round her.

"If you would only tell me that you hate me," she sobbed. "Don't you know how horrid I have been to you? I can't even let you be happy now without begrudging it to you. I helped to make you miserable before; I dare say I should like to make you miserable now."

"Oh no, you wouldn't," Johanna said smiling. "Tell me, Hilvardine, what would you like best to do now, if you had the choice?"

"Never to see this place again," answered the girl passionately.

Johanna began to think that Madame Steen had a fine discernment.

"I believe you would enjoy the life at the Hague," she said, after reflection.

"I hate to belong to no one. I should like to work—to earn my own bread," announced Hilvardine, somewhat inconsequently. "However, do not be afraid. I shall go to the Hague for a little while, and then—home."

Johanna was a good deal relieved.

"You will not find Madame Steen so difficult as you imagine," she said. "And there will always be our house."

"You are very generous, Aunt Johanna," said Hilvardine, looking at her.

"Ah, no," said the other, smiling brightly. "It would be generous of me if I had misgivings; I have no misgivings, I tell you frankly."

And indeed, when she thought of Mathius there was a confidence, a trust in her love, which seemed as if it could not admit the possibility of change in herself or him. It was just at this moment that they heard a distant shout. The sound was caught up and carried towards them by a hundred voices; women's in the hamlet itself rose loud and shrill. Grietje called up the stairs—

“Mejufvrouw, look out, look out! That means that the dyke is saved!”

Johanna and Hilvardine both ran down. Women were waving handkerchiefs, children jumping about, dogs barking. The excitement touched point after point, and answering cries were shouted from other hamlets. Even Grietje, whose house lay under those smiling waters—nay, more, Rika, and Jan's mother, carried away for the moment by the triumphal outcry, waved with the rest. The energy of the fight, the glow of victory, carried everything before it, even sorrow. Cootje clapped her hands; her eyes sparkled. As for Johanna, she thrilled with pride to think of the part Mathius and his brother had had in the work. Madame Steen inquired of Grietje whether now the men would leave the place.

“Some of them, mevrouw. My man has scarcely had his wet clothes off; he will come back, and the Heeren Mathius, and those who have been there so long. Others must go on and finish what there is to be done, and then the pumping will begin.”

She spoke bravely, but tears suddenly stood in her eyes, and little Rika crept up and caught her arm.

“They are all so pleased,” she said, with a sob. “Think how glad Jan would have been!”

Taken from one, given to another. Johanna's eyes, too, filled, when she thought of herself and Rika. She

took the girl's hand in hers and led her gently away, and let the poor thing talk of Jan and all that he was, and cry softly till some of the weight went out of her heart.

* * * *

It was growing dusk that evening when the town councillor and his wife, Johanna and Mathius, reached Utrecht. As they came slowly along in the train, it seemed to Johanna that the beauty and peacefulness of the sky and land had never been equalled. For overhead the great expanse of sky, which by its grandeur and immensity seems to compensate for the absence of large features in the landscape, was golden with the last glories of the day—golden not with splendid and glowing tints, but with the delicate, indescribable clear saffron against which the darkness of the land lies softly. Every little canal or wayside pool reflected the quiet colour; every clump of trees, every windmill, showed out against its exquisite background. After the turmoil and disturbance of the last days, the solemn peace came like a benediction to Johanna. She and Mathius were very silent, but they were next each other, one thought filled both their hearts. When they reached the station, Madame Steen took away her husband.

“We will drive home, Frans, but those two will like to walk.”

“Let us go round by the canal, Johanna,” said Mathius.

All the yellow evening lights were reflected in the canal, the heavy round-bowed boats were drawn up along the sides, little homely groups sat about on the decks, curls of blue smoke floated up from the small chimneys. At one corner of the canal two great windmills stood close together, with projecting wooden balconies and rich brown sails; all the delicate red of the houses glowed in

the soft intense light; the trees, now beautiful with a delicate dust of green, showed little colour, but an infinite loveliness of tracery against the sky. Yet there was something more for which Johanna and Mathius waited as they strolled along the green banks. They saw it at last—the great tower of the cathedral rising solemnly against the quiet sky. When it came into sight, they stood still and looked at it silently, then at each other. Mathius drew Johanna close to him and held her there—his own.

“At last!” he said; “at last!”

And from the tower of the cathedral, far away and soft, there came dropping down, as from heaven to earth, the sweet hesitating notes of the old chorale.

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W. Hepworth Dixon: Personal History of Lord Bacon 1 v. The Holy Land, 2 v. New America 2 v. Spiritual Wives 2 v. Her Majesty's Tower 4 v. Free Russia 2 v. History of two Queens 6 v. White Conquest 2 v. Diana, Lady Lyle 2 v.

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Mrs. Elliot: Diary of an Idle Woman in Italy 2 v. Old Court Life in France 2 v. The Italians 2 v. The

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A. Forbes: My Experiences of the War between France and Germany 2 v. Soldiering and Scribbling 1 v. See also "Daily News," War Correspondence.

Mrs. Forrester: Viva 2 v. Rhona 2 v. Roy and Viola 2 v. My Lord and My Lady 2 v. I have Lived and Loved 2 v. June 2 v. Omnia Vanitas 1 v.

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"Found Dead," Author of—*vide* James Payn.

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Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone: Rome and the newest Fashions in Religion 1 v. Bulgarian Horrors; Russia in Turkistan 1 v. The Hellenic Factor in the Eastern Problem 1 v.

Goldsmith: Select Works: The Vicar of Wakefield; Poems; Dramas (w. portrait) 1 v.

Mrs. Gore: Castles in the Air 1 v. The Dean's Daughter 2 v. Progress and Prejudice 2 v. Mammon 2 v. A Life's Lessons 2 v. The two Aristocracies 2 v. Heckington 2 v.

Miss Grant: Victor Lescar 2 v. The Sun-Maid 2 v. My Heart's in the Highlands 2 v. Artiste 2 v. Prince Hugo 2 v.

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Bret Harte: Prose and Poetry (Tales of the Argonauts; Spanish and American Legends; Condensed Novels; Civic and Character Sketches; Poems) 2 v. Idyls of the Foothills 1 v. Gabriel Conroy 2 v. Two Men of Sandy Bar 1 v. Thankful Blossom 1 v. The Story of a Mine 1 v. Drift from Two Shores 1 v. An Heiress of Red Dog 1 v. The Twins of Table Mountain, etc. 1 v. Jeff Briggs's Love Story, etc. 1 v. Flip, etc. 1 v. On the Frontier 1 v.

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J. H. Ingram: *vide* E. A. Poe.

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Edward Jenkins: Ginx's Baby; Lord Bantam 2 v.

"Jennie of 'the Prince's,'" Author of— *vide* Mrs. Buxton.

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"John Halifax," Author of— *vide* Mrs. Craik.

"Johnny Ludlow," Author of— *vide* Mrs. Wood.

Johnson: The Lives of the English Poets 2 v.

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"Joshua Davidson," Author of— *vide* E. Lynn Linton.

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E. C. Grenville: Murray: The Member for Paris 2 v. Young Brown 2 v. The Boudoir Cabal 3 v. French Pictures in English Chalk (1st Series) 2 v. The Russians of To-day 1 v. French Pictures in English Chalk (2nd Series) 2 v. Strange Tales 1 v. That Artful Vicar 2 v. Six Months in the Ranks 1 v. People I have met 1 v.

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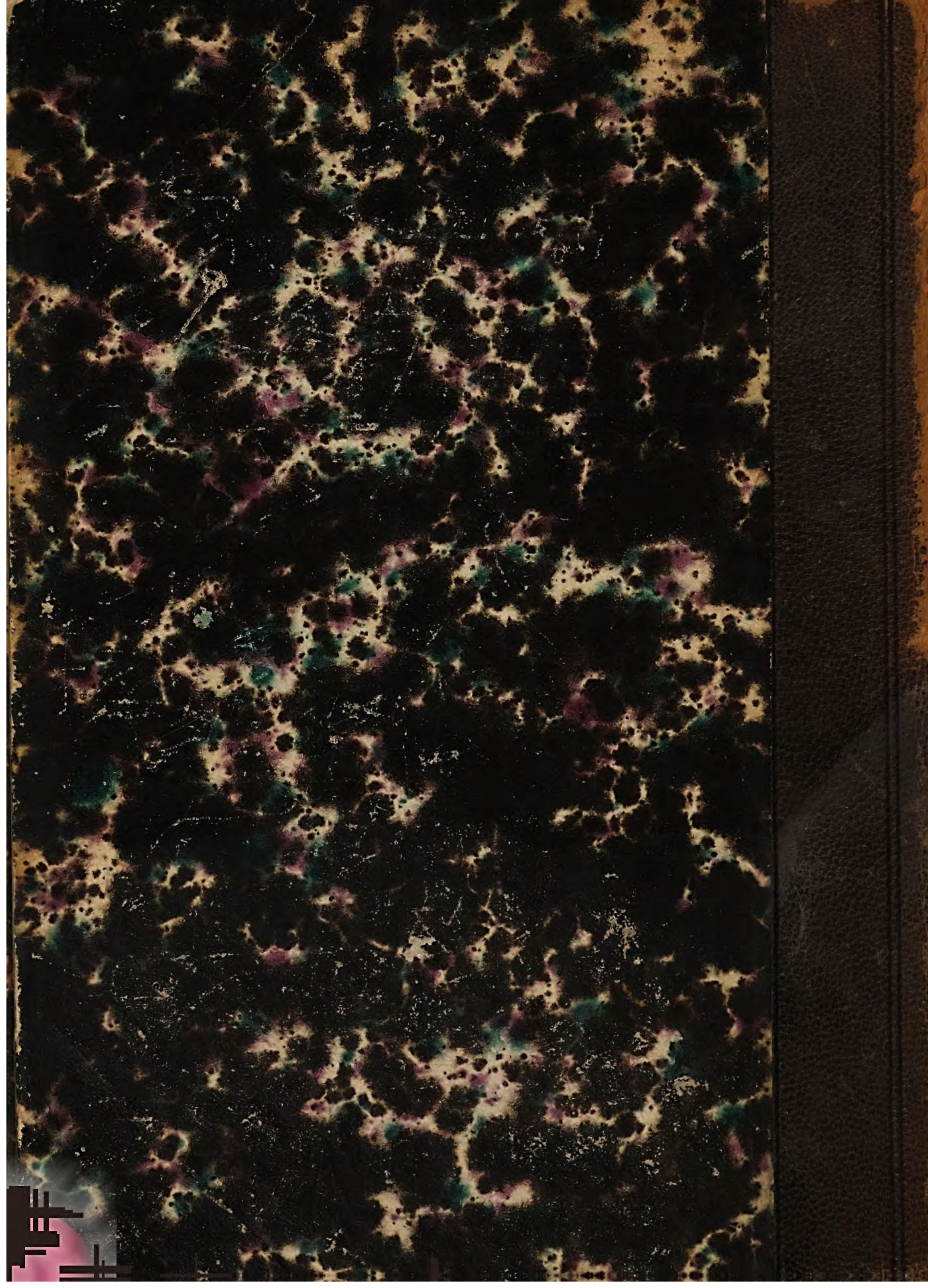
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